Overwintering Elephant's-Ear and Caladium

When the growing season winds down, planning for spring gardening begins.

Part of planning for spring involves lifting and storing the tender bulbs that will not survive cold temperatures. This includes caladium (Caladium x hortulanum) and elephant's-ear (Colocasia esculenta), which can be left in the ground properly mulched in USDA Zones 8-10. Tulsa falls in Zone 7a (0 to 5 °F/-17.8 to -15 °C), so these will not survive should temperatures fall that low.

Leaving in the ground under a heavy mound of leaves and grass clippings might suffice when gambling on a mild winter, but if gambling and rebuying new plant material every year is not in the budget, digging up and storing tender bulbs might be an option.

What is a bulb, anyway?

A true bulb is actually a modified plant stem, consisting of a bud and fleshy leaf layers that function as a food storage structure during dormancy or drought. But there are other structures loosely referred to as "bulbs" in the gardening world that really are not.

The structures of caladium (Caladium x hortulanum) and elephant's-ear (Colocasia esculenta) are in fact **tubers.** If you're curious about these specialized wonders (they really are!), here are some quick definitions and familiar examples of bulbs and "bulblike structures":

True bulbs: Common, teardrop-shaped form, some with a "tunic", a papery sleeve that keeps the bulb from drying out. Layered on the inside, growing point on top, flat root structure on bottom. **Examples: Daffodils, tulips, hyacinths.**

Corms: Similar to a true bulb in shape, but structurally different as not layered on the inside (as an onion). **Examples: Crocus, gladiolus.**

Tuberous roots: The specialized, enlarged root structures provide food storage and are joined to the stem. **Examples: Sweet potatoes, dahlias, daylilies.**

Rhizomes: Modified stems that enlarge, running horizontally just above or below the soil.
Examples: Iris, ginger, canna.

Tubers: Potatoes are tubers - enlarged stem tissue structure with growing points called “eyes”.
Other examples: Elephant’s-ear, caladium, Cyclamen, tuberous begonias.

How do I lift and store them?

When the foliage is killed by frost, tubers may be lifted out of the soil and stored.

Start by digging, preferably with a pitchfork, about one foot away, all around the base of the plant. Loosen the soil gently to avoid damaging the roots and the tuber flesh, because bruising and damage invites insects, disease and rot.

Select the largest, healthiest tubers for storage. Rinse them gently with water to remove loose dirt, but don’t scrub. Cut the foliage to about an inch from the crown. You may scissor the fibrous roots, or cut them after drying. Caladiums could use a dusting of sulphur powder to help deter rot; this can be found at garden centers.

Allow to dry and cure for about a week in an area where temperatures are between 60-70˚F, away from direct sun and wind.

When cured, store them in a cool dry location (not lower than 45˚F), in paper, peat or wood shavings. Don't forget to label them with the cultivar name and any other necessary information.

Check them periodically and discard immediately if rotted or damaged by insects.

When do I plant them again?

When the danger of frost has passed in the spring, tubers may be planted directly in the ground.

With a bit of work and preparation, your elephant's-ear and caladium will be ready for spring planting…it'll be here before you know it!

Reference:

OSU Extension Fact Sheet HLA-6410: Perennial Flowers for Specific Uses in Oklahoma
OSU Extension Plant ID Profiles: Elephant's-Ear (Colocasia esculenta)
USDA Plant Hardiness Zone Map
Missouri Botanical Garden: Caladium bicolor/Caladium x hortulanum
Missouri Botanical Garden: Colocasia esculenta
University of Minnesota Extension: Fall Care for Tender and Hardy Bulbs
University of Delaware MG Minute: Overwintering a Tropical Elephant Ear Plant, Part 1
University of Delaware MG Minute: Overwintering a Tropical Elephant Ear Plant, Part 2