

Elephant's Ear or Taro

Colocasia esculenta

Conditions

Elephant ears are a tropical plant and like high humidity, heat and partial to full shade.

Soil and Water

Grow in fertile, humus-rich, moist or wet, slightly acidic soil. They need plenty of water.

Fertilizer

Fertilize slowly at first. It is a good idea to fertilize every month during the growing season with a balanced, 20-20-20 fertilizer. A water-soluble fertilizer such as Miracle Gro or Peters works well.



Planting the bulb

Elephant ears come in various sizes, the larger the bulb the larger the plant will be for the season.

The pointed end goes up and the blunt end goes down. It is sometimes hard to tell the difference between the top and the bottom. Plant deep enough to cover just below the tip. Most bulbs are planted at a depth of one and a half times their length. Make sure you have plenty of room for growth, mulch and fertilize them once a month during the growing season. Do not overwater at this stage because the bulbs could rot. Check the soil to assure that it is moist but not soggy.

When to plant

After the last frost date and when the soil has warmed up is the time to plant the elephant ears. They love well-prepared soil.

Dividing and propagating

The best way to propagate elephant ears is to divide the bulbs at the time of planting in the spring.

Dividing the elephant ear is easy, just dig it up (dig far enough away from it so not to damage the roots, say eight to twelve inches) and pull the roots apart into three sections. Be careful and you might think there are no roots but there are.

Then, repot or replant them in similar soil. They may droop for a while. The success rate is not 100% but that is the chance you take. With mulching and fertilization, the bulbs should produce bulblets off the sides of the main bulb from the previous season.

Another choice time to divide the bulbs is when digging them up in the fall and then store for the winter season in a dry cool place.

If you are willing to take a chance and leave them in the ground year round, divide them in the spring and spread them around. Fertilize well, mulch and they will grow faster. If it is dry for a week or two after you replant them, supplement with some extra watering. (Remember, this can be risky in our area unless the winter is an exceptionally mild one).

Transplanting

An elephant ear does not have much of a root system. Take off the shoots that are bulblets and plant those, if there are any. Then divide it by the trunks while trying to keep roots with each trunk. If it loses the lower leaves or stems it can survive.



When transplanting the plant material, it may wilt. Make sure they are mulched and it may take a week or so before they perk up. Some leaves may die back, just trim these off.

Transplanting in the middle of the summer is always hard on plant material so be ready to give them special treatment if you choose this time of year. Do not over water; check every few days and do not fertilize.

Yellow leaves

An elephant ear that is in a climate that is outside and thriving all year will tend to shed its lower leaves during the year and much more in fall. The lower leaves turn yellow and fall off or just droop to the ground.

Where the bulb goes dormant in the winter, yellow leaves tends to happen as the plant shuts down for the winter. The leaves turn a more pale green, then yellow, then bright yellow and droop and fall to the ground. Pick these leaves off and dispose of them when they become unsightly.

Protecting elephant ear bulbs in winter

Digging up the elephant ear for the season should happen when the plant starts to die back. If you miss this time and you have your first frost, still take the time to dig them. Do not wait any longer because the bulbs will start to get mushy. Cut off the large leaves and leave just a stem to help plant the bulbs next spring.

Dig up the elephant ear bulb if it is not in a very protected area. If you have a microclimate and plenty of mulch to insulate the bulb, you may want to chance it. But know it may not come back if it has a harsh winter.

Dry off the plantings and trim the tops off. Store in a warm dry area and cover with peat moss, vermiculite or sawdust. Something that will keep the roots dry. Any chance of temperatures below freezing may mush the bulbs.

Sometimes in wet winters and if there is not good drainage, you could get a very mushy bulb and it may rot.

Bulbs in containers should be brought indoors for the winter months. Containers usually get even colder than the ground.

Pictures are from the Parker County Master Gardener CD from the real dirt: a Garden Handbook for Parker County