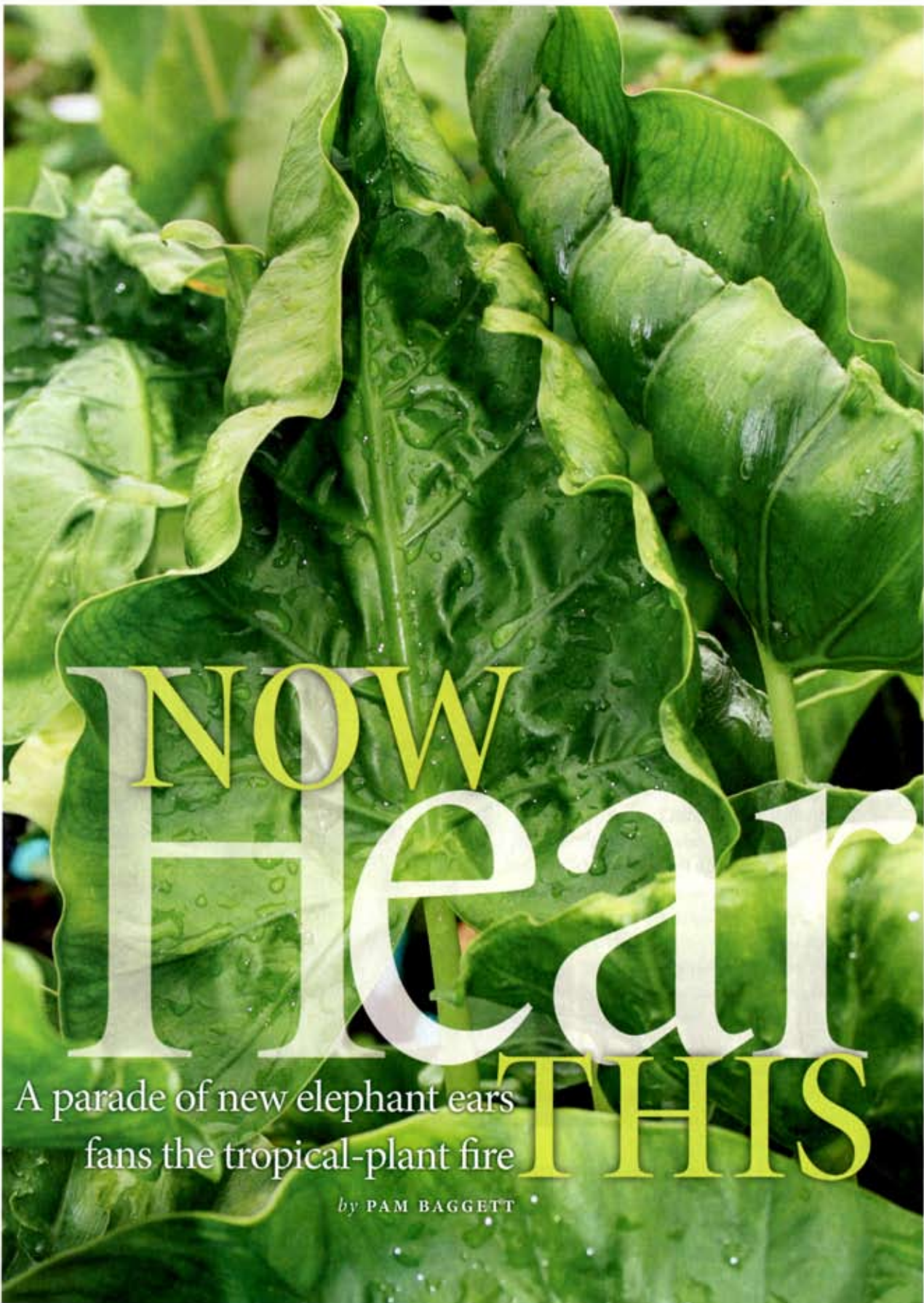


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A parade of new elephant ears
fans the tropical-plant fire

by PAM BAGGETT

When two black-leaved elephant ears, *Colocasia esculenta* 'Illustris' and 'Black Magic', hit the mainstream garden market in the 1990s, they sparked wild hopes among gardeners. If these astounding plants existed, what other phenomenal elephant ears must be poised to follow? But as "tropicalismo" gardening swept the country, few new introductions appeared, and those flew largely under the radar of most plant lovers. A slow-burning fuse must have been ignited, though, for recently, several remarkable colocasias have been introduced, with improved hardiness. Some are lucky finds; others, the work of a talented plant breeder whose efforts promise to renew gardeners' excitement in the genus.

DR. CHO'S INTROS

When Plant Delights Nursery owner Tony Avent traveled to Hawaii several years ago, his search for new elephant ears led him to Dr. John J. Cho. A plant pathologist at the University of Hawaii, Dr. Cho was working to create disease-resistant strains of the important food crop taro, a kind of colocasia. But in his greenhouses and fields, Avent saw elephant ears with enormous ornamental potential. It was a plant hunter's dream. Protocols for a breeding program were established, trials were begun at Avent's North Carolina nursery and in 2008 the first introductions in the Royal Hawaiian series were released. All are hardy to USDA Zone 7b.

Most dramatic of Dr. Cho's current introductions is 'Diamond Head', whose glossy green new leaves quickly change to the color of bittersweet chocolate. Unlike 'Illustris' and 'Black Magic', whose leaves lose color as they age, the puckered foliage of 'Diamond Head' remains a rich, saturated shade. Its ruby stems grow four to five feet tall.

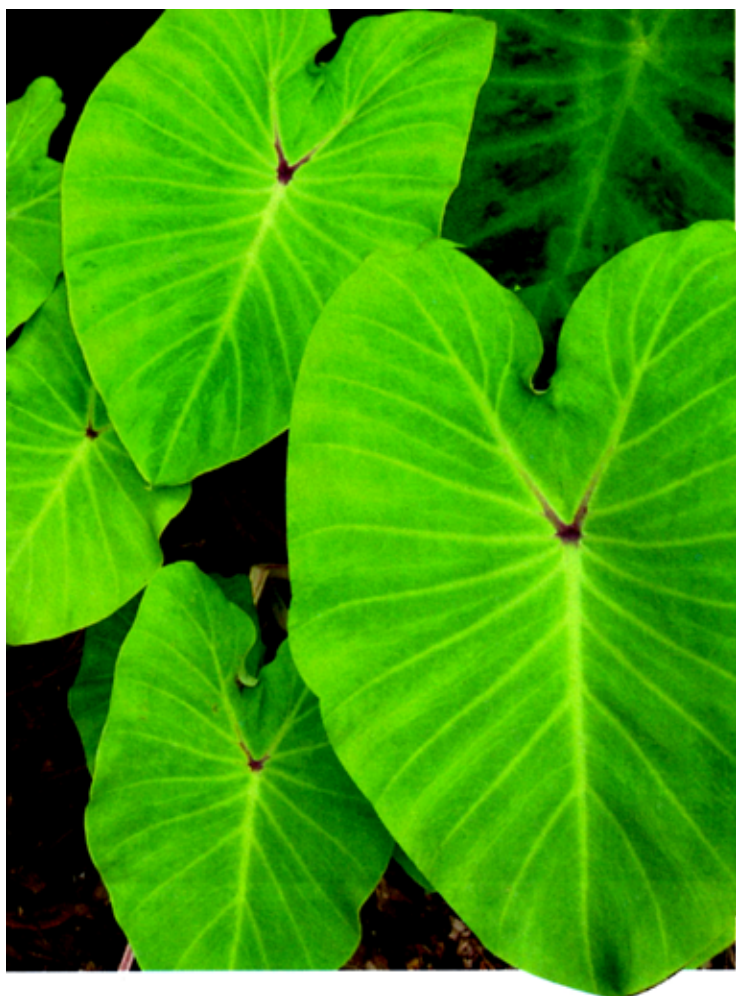
'Hilo Bay' produces shiny emerald foliage cooled by an undercurrent of purple. A subtle lavender eye and lavender veining add highlights to moderately puckered leaves borne on near-black, three- to four-foot stems. Older cultivars of elephant ears tend to be rangy, but 'Hilo Bay' spreads only slightly, producing an abundance of 21-inch leaves.

Five-foot tall 'Maui Magic' is a vigorous plant with murky violet leaves and wine-dark stems. Older leaves become greener but retain hints of mulberry. Though a powerful grower, 'Maui Magic' does not produce runners and shows no propensity to spread.





- 1| *Colocasia esculenta* 'Blue Hawaii'
- 2| *Xanthosoma atrovirens* 'Albomarginata' (Zone 9)
- 3| *C. e.* 'Pineapple Princess'
- 4| *C.* 'Coffee Cups'
- 5| *C. gigantea* Thailand Giant Strain
- 6| *C. e.* 'Jack's Giant', which can grow eight feet tall



'Hawaiian Eye' resembles a stormy sky pierced by lightning. The silver-veined foliage emerges soft sable overcast with gray, shifting to grayish green as the leaves mature. Shiny black, four-foot stems extend the sultry color scheme, contrasted in late summer by flowers that are yellow in both spathe and spadix.

'Pineapple Princess' displays an unusual color combination: new leaves emerge suffused with ruddy red, but as the foliage ages the redder tones fall away, creating pale olive-green leaves with prominent dusky lavender veins. Three-foot-tall 'Pineapple Princess' spreads five feet wide but does not produce aggressive stolons. In late summer and fall, it bears fragrant yellow flowers.

A compact, 30-inch-tall plant, 'Blue Hawaii' offers mid-green foliage with bold plum veins that extend to the leaf margins. Leaf edges are penciled in plum, while the backs of the 20-inch leaves are bolder than the fronts, thanks to the brilliant cranberry stem color that spills upward into the veins.

LUCKY FINDS

While Dr. Cho's elephant ears are the result of planned breeding, several recent introductions come to gardeners courtesy of careful attention and old-fashioned luck. Elephant ears propagated through tissue culture occasionally produce random sports, rogue plants with


sometimes interesting characteristics. Growers watch for plants like *C. esculenta* 'Mojito' (Zone 7b), a festive introduction that originated at a Florida nursery. A sport of 'Burgundy Stem,' 'Mojito' bears lime-green leaves splashed with flecks and bold blocks of inky purple. In moist soils, 'Mojito' leaps to six feet tall, while drier sites yield a four-foot plant.

Three- to five-foot-tall *C. e.* 'Elena' occurred as a sport of 'Chicago Harlequin.' Its lemon-lime leaves, traced with pale magenta veins, may not be quite as vibrant as those of chartreuse *Xanthosoma* 'Lime Zinger' (Zone 9), but 'Elena' boasts significantly greater winter hardiness and much-improved vigor.

Masquerading as *Colocasia antiquorum*, *C. esculenta* 'Coal Miner' (Zone 7) snuck into the United States from India. Its smoky black leaves with green veins resemble those of 'Illustris,' but 'Coal Miner' grows much larger—to over five feet tall—and emerges from dormancy weeks before 'Illustris' deigns to awaken.

The oddest of the recent introductions must be *C. 'Coffee Cups'* (Zone 8), a six-foot selection discovered by Indonesian botanist Gregory Hambali. Glossy olive-green leaves with well-inked veins form cups that catch and hold water until they eventually tilt forward, spilling their bounty. In a rainstorm, 'Coffee Cups' turns into a temporary water fountain.

A BRIGHT FUTURE

What does the future hold for elephant ears? Dr. Cho retired from the university in 2009 but continues his breeding work. He's become so adept at creating new plants that he's now able to craft almost anything that Avent suggests. Never-before-seen color patterns—like inky black leaves with creamy veins or green foliage etched with ruby red—may soon be realities. Dr. Cho is also focused on producing plants that don't generate the leggy runners that turn some elephant ears into aggressive spreaders. He's creating compact varieties for containers, as well. And in 2009, he made crosses with the megalithic *C. gigantea* Thailand Giant Strain. Dare gardeners hope for a dwarf colocasia with plum-purple foliage, or a jet-black eight-foot plant with five-foot leaves? The answer may well be yes. 

PAM BAGGETT is a *Horticulture* contributing editor who gardens and writes in North Carolina.

Tending the Herd

Elephant ears (*Colocasia*) are heavy feeders that also require a consistent moisture supply. Given those two prerequisites, they're easy to grow. Avoid planting outside until nights remain above 50°F, and don't expect much action until temperatures become reliably warm.

Though colocasias like wet soil during the growing season, they winter better in soils with good drainage. North of Zone 7b, store them dormant in containers kept cool but above freezing, or let them go on growing in a warm, sunny indoor space.—PB

Opposite page: *Colocasia esculenta* 'Elena'
Below: *C. e.* 'Mojito'

