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in the garden *by Stephen and Kristin Pategas*

Plants In Stupid Places

Oh my, have we seen some good ones. There are the plants struggling in the wrong soil, or improper light or moisture conditions. The ones planted in the incorrect season or totally out of their hardiness zone. But the most obvious mistakes are plants planted in inappropriate locations.

Tropical plants meant only for the warmer climes of South Florida will suffer or even die in our normal winter temperatures. Plants from cooler climates usually fry in our summer heat. Some of these plants are favorites from other places where we gardened. For some gardeners who escaped the cold weather for Florida's warmth, favored plants travel along in the backseat, are found at an unknowing or self-serving garden center or are ordered off of the Internet. Apparently hope springs eternal for those who claim their sad-looking and struggling hosta or Japanese maple really does look just fine.

Carefully select the surface to grow the creeping fig (Ficus pumila) upon.



Plant the wax privet tree (Ligustrum japonicum) at least 12 feet from a structure.



The Washington palm (Washingtonia robusta) can reach more than 50 feet in height.

Know these basics about a plant before you buy it or accept it from someone:

- Its name (botanical preferred), so you can do more research about it. Would you eat something not knowing what it is or whether it's safe to eat? Google the plant but check multiple sites since we've seen misinformation online. Start with the University of Florida IFAS Extension: <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/>.
- Is it on the invasive plant list? These plants will grow throughout your yard and easily spread to natural areas. No-no's include Mexican petunia, asparagus fern, sword fern and elephant ear. While they are durable and cover lots of ground they are not good bargains since removing them from your landscape is high maintenance. Visit <http://www.fleppc.org/list/2011PlantList.pdf> for the latest list.
- How tall and wide does it grow? Just take a look at the accompanying photographs to see what kind of problems can occur. Do not expect a plant to never get any larger than when it comes home with you.
- How does it propagate itself? Plants with prolific seeds with a high germination rate or aggressive underground runners are hard to control and do not contribute to a low-maintenance garden.
- What soil and moisture levels does it need? Since Central Florida soils range from well to poorly drained, know what type your garden has and what the plant needs.
- What light conditions does it need to thrive - sun, shade or in-between?
- What hardiness zone does it thrive in? Central Florida is in Zone 9b (average annual extreme minimum temperatures of 25 to 30 degrees). During the summer while traveling well north of Florida in Zone 7a (0 to 5 degrees) we've seen Zone 9 and 10 tropical and semi-tropical plants for sale at big box stores. Even worse is the lack of signage stating they won't survive outdoors beyond that area's summer season.

If your hosta or other plant from another Zone REALLY does look great after a full year let us know where it is growing so we can rush over to get a cutting, seed, or offset! ■

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All photography by Stephen G. Pategas/Hortus Oasis