

Copperleaf

ACALYPHA WILKESIANA

By Eric Schmidt

Copperleaf is an evergreen, tropical shrub that has been cultivated in Florida for decades. Botanically it is known as *Acalypha wilkesiana* and belongs to the Euphorbiaceae Family. Like the related Croton, *Codiaeum variegatum*, it is grown for its colored foliage. And also like the Croton, many cultivars with different leaf shapes, sizes and colors have been developed.

Copperleaf has been so widely cultivated that its exact native origin is unknown. It is believed to be originally native to South Pacific Islands. It is a tropical shrub and grows best in the southern and central parts of Florida. Frost or below freezing temperatures can damage Copperleaf, but it grows back quickly in spring and summer. Plant it in a warm location in the landscape. In colder locations be prepared to protect the shrub in winter. Copperleaf prefers full sun or light shade. Plants in full sun will have the best coloring. They can tolerate shade, but the shadier the location the less vivid the foliage color will be. Some of the cultivars with white or yellow markings look better with filtered afternoon sun.

Copperleaf grows best in fertile, well drained soil. It has some drought tolerance but looks better with adequate moisture. It also has few pest problems. Aphids often attack the soft new growth. They can easily be controlled with an insecticidal soap or can be tolerated for a period of time until ladybugs and other natural predators discover and control them. They are also susceptible to nematodes in our sandy soil. Enhance the soil before planting and keep them mulched and fertilized. This will make the plants more resistant.

Most Copperleaf cultivars grow 5-7 feet tall. Some of the smaller leaved cultivars may be a bit shorter. They will tolerate pruning and can be kept trimmed as a smaller shrub. They can also be cut back hard in spring or summer if they get too leggy. Copperleaf grows very easily from cuttings. They root best during the summer months when they are actively growing.

Many different cultivars have been developed with a wide range of leaf sizes, shapes and colors. Some have green leaves with white or yellow markings, others have leaves with shades of copper, red, pink, or orange.



Photos left to right:
'Macafeana'
and 'Brazen'
Color bar at top:
'Loco'

Here are some descriptions for some of the cultivars we are growing at Leu Gardens:

'Brazen'

the large leaves are dark bronze colored

'Coral Glow'

leaves are a light coral pink

'Fire Dragon'

curly leaves are reddish bronze with cream margins

'Godseffiana'

the green leaves are very narrow with jagged edges that are white

'Inferno'

small pointed leaves; the color can change during the year from bright red to various shades of red, orange, and yellow

'Java White'

large oval leaves colored green and white

'Loco'

twisted leaves that are marked green, red and bronze

'Macafeeana'

large red and copper colored leaves

'Macrophylla'

large heart shaped leaves marked with dark red and bronze

'Marginata'

copper leaves with serrated edges colored in pink

'Miltoniana'

a larger growing cultivar with large multicolored leaves marked with red, orange, bronze, and green

'Moorea'

large leaves are curled with scalloped edges and are a dark blackish bronze color

'Raggedy Ann'

narrow serrated leaves that are dark maroon

'Tahiti'

large twisted leaves are green and yellow

'Tricolor'

leaves are colored red, green, and yellow



Photos on right, top to bottom: 'Inferno', 'Java White', and 'Tricolor'