

# *Colocasia esculenta* (L.) Schott



**Common Name:** Taro, wild taro, dasheen

**Synonymy:** *C. antiquorum* var. *esculenta* Schott, *Caladium esculentum* Hort.

**Origin:** India, southeastern Asia

**Botanical Description:** Perennial herb to 1.5 m (4 ft) tall, with thick shoots from a large corm; slender stolons also often produced, along with offshoot corms. Leaf blades to 60 cm (24 in) long and 50 cm (20 in) wide, arrowhead shaped, with upper surface dark green and velvety; leaves peltate (stalked from back of blade); petioles large, succulent, often purplish near top. Inflorescence on a fleshy stalk shorter than leaf petioles; part of fleshy stalk enveloped by a long yellow bract (spathe). Flowers tiny, densely crowded on upper part of fleshy stalk, with female flowers below and male flowers above. Fruit a small berry, in clusters on the fleshy stalk.

**NOTE:** May be confused with other plants in Florida having large arrowhead-shaped leaf blades, such as the native arums (*Peltandra* spp.) and the exotic elephant's ear (*Xanthosoma sagittifolium*), but leaves of all similar-looking species not peltate (i.e., their petioles are attached at the leaf-blade margin).

**Ecological Significance:** Brought from Africa to the Americas as a food crop for slaves (Greenwell 1947). Introduced into Florida and other southern states in 1910 by the United States Department of Agriculture as a substitute crop for potatoes (Fairchild 1947, Greenwell 1947). Considered an "aggressive weed" in parts of the Southeast by 1974 (Cook et al. 1974). Widely naturalized in Florida along streams, marshy shores, canals, and ditches by 1979 (Godfrey and Wooten 1979). Still promoted as food, feed, and fuel

crop for Florida in the 1980s (e.g., O'Hair et al. 1982, Shih and Snyder 1984). Reported as naturalized in 183 public water bodies in 1990 (Schardt and Schmitz 1990); found in 235 public water bodies by 1994 (Schardt 1997). Forms dense growth along river and lake shores, displacing native shoreline vegetation (Akridge and Fonteyn 1981, McCann et al. 1996).

**Distribution:** Now found throughout the tropics and much of the subtropics. Considered a principal agricultural weed in Puerto Rico and present as a weed in Jamaica (Holm et al. 1979). In Florida, documented as invading water's edge rooting in muck, swamps, blackwater streams, riverine forests, and ruderal communities. Herbarium specimens recorded from 35 counties as far west as Escambia County in the Panhandle through the peninsula south to Miami-Dade and Monroe counties (Wunderlin and Hansen 2004). Dense to scattered populations reported from natural areas throughout Florida, particularly on the peninsula in 16 additional counties (FLEPPC 2005). Also reported from natural areas in southern Georgia, Alabama, Louisiana, and Texas (C. Jacono, United States Geological Survey, 1998 pers. comm.).

**Life History:** Can grow in a wide range of dry to wet sites (de la Pena 1983). Dispersed primarily by purposeful or accidental movement of vegetative fragments. Only a portion of corm crown and petiole needed to establish a new plant (Begley 1979). Flowers occasionally, fruit not often seen (Godfrey and Wooten 1979). Seed production (2-5 per berry) considered uncommon, with low viability and difficulty in germination (Jackson et al. 1977, Nyman and Arditti 1985, O'Hair et al. 1982, Strauss 1983).

