

Weed alert

Wild taro

(*Colocasia esculenta*)

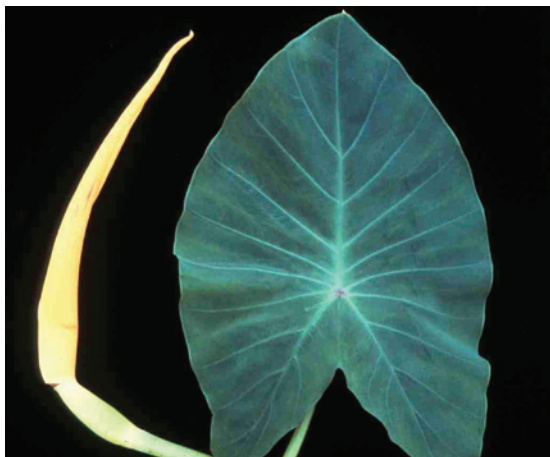
Wild taro

This native of India and southeastern Asia was brought from Africa to the Americas as a food crop for slaves. By 1910, it was introduced into Florida and other southeastern states by the U.S. Department of Agriculture as a possible substitute crop for potatoes. Wild taro has escaped cultivation and forms dense stands that displace native shoreline vegetation in Florida's streams, rivers, marshy lakeshores, canals and ditches. Often shoreline wild taro stands break loose and form floating islands that block navigational access and increase flooding potential in canals.

Wild taro may be confused with other plants in Florida that have large arrowhead-shaped leaf blades, such as the nonnative elephant ear (*Xanthosoma sagittifolium*) and the native arums (*Peltandra spp.*). Only taro has leaf stalks attached to the back of the leaf blade.



Wild taro along a Florida waterway.



Above: Close up of arrowhead-shaped leaf along with yellow bract.

Why wild taro must be managed:

- Wild taro populations have changed the ecology of a large portion of shorelines along the St. Johns River and its tributaries by crowding out native plants that are important sources of food for wildlife.
- Biologists have reported that wild taro infestations are spreading in Florida's water bodies increasing from 32 percent in 1983 to 62 percent in public lakes and rivers in 2002.
- Wild taro populations are difficult to control in Florida and quickly resprout after herbicide application or hand-pulling if the entire rhizome is not killed or removed.

Wild taro tubers contain oxalic acid crystals, giving it an acrid taste and causing irritation unless prepared properly. The plant must be handled with care, for all parts contain the irritant.



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Synonymy: Colocasia antiquorum var. *esculenta*, *Caladium esculentum*

Wild taro (*Colocasia esculenta*)

Wild taro has spread to various shorelines throughout Florida and is considered an agricultural weed in Puerto Rico and Jamaica. It is dispersed primarily by purposeful or accidental movement of vegetative fragments.



Leaves: Leaf blades to 60 cm (24 in.) long and 50 cm (20 in.) wide, arrowhead shaped, with upper surface dark green velvety and water repellent; leaves peltate (stalked from back of blade); petioles large, succulent, often purplish near top.



Flowers: Inflorescence on a fleshy stalk shorter than leaf petioles, with part of the fleshy stalk enveloped by a long yellow bract (spathe). Flowers tiny, densely crowded on upper part of the fleshy stalk, with female flowers below and male flowers above.



Fruits: Fruit a small berry, in clusters on the fleshy stalk.

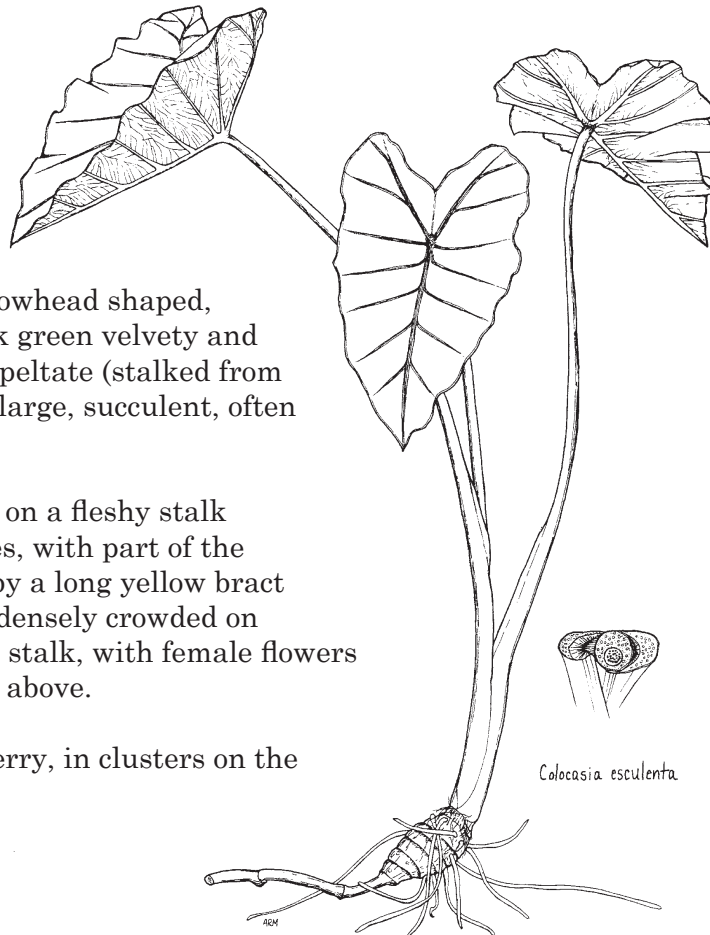


Illustration courtesy of University of Florida,
Center for Aquatic and Invasive Plants

Look for first:

- large arrowhead shaped-leaves
- leaf blades dark green above, with velvety sheen
- leaf stalks (petioles) from back of blades
- yellow spathe

Distribution

Now found escaped throughout the tropics and much of the subtropics, including Florida.



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