Variegated Plants for Hawai‘i Landscapes

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White is a contrasting color to any dark, cool color such as green. Green is the dominant color in landscapes because it is the color of most foliage. Variegated color can be green and white or green and yellow. Not many large tropical plants are variegated, but many tropical shrubs and groundcovers are.

Many plants that can exist in a tropical or subtropical environment do not necessarily give a “tropical” feeling. Examples, in my opinion, are plumerias, bougainvilleas, rainbow shower trees, ixoras, and hibiscuses.

Groups of plants that I believe provide more of a tropical look are palms, heliconias, gingkis, bamboos, ferns, bromeliads, birds of paradise, orchids, members of the Araceae and Marantaceae families, certain aquatic plants, some tropical vines such as the passion flowers, and large ficus trees with aerial roots. Specific plants for this purpose include *Ficus pseudopalma*, *Ludovia lancifolia*, *Osmuxylon lineare*, *Piper magnificum* (also known as *Piper pseudolindenii* C. DC.; this plant has not been assessed for its invasive potential), and *Begonia nelumbifolia* (New Guinea impatiens). Monocotyledons in particular lend a primordial flavor.

Tall, attractive variegated tropical plants are not common. The banana *Musa paradisiaca* ‘Koa‘e’, which is somewhat common in Kona on Hawai‘i, is an exception. It is distinguished by striking white and green variegation on the foliage and the fruit. The green and white variegated Chinese ficus tree with aerial roots is another example, but it probably should not be used in the same landscape with ‘Koa‘e’ because the two have completely different looks.

The variegated bamboo *Bambusa vulgaris* ‘Aureo-variegata’ (variegated giant golden bamboo) is another exception, this one yellow and green. Tall green plants can also be used in landscapes in the background to set off green and yellow variegated shrubs and groundcovers in the foreground.

Plants with green and white variegation are shown beginning on p. 3; those with green and yellow variegation begin on p. 13. These plants are just a few of the possibilities, however; their selection is based on my personal aesthetic preference and is intended to give you a start in developing your own list of plants to provide highlights to a landscape. Other green and white plants...
not illustrated here include *Calathea albertii* ‘Emperor’ (this species has been assessed as a low risk for invasiveness), *C. libbyana*, *Dieffenbachia* ‘Exotica Alba’, and *Musa paradisiaca* ‘Koa’e’. For other possibilities, look at the references and sources for further reading.

**Hawaii-Pacific Weed Risk Assessment (HPWRA)**

When considering a plant species to use in a landscape or garden, it is important to understand the species’ ability to adapt to its new environment and perhaps cause unintentional harm. In Hawai‘i it is possible to create a tropical theme in the landscape while at the same time reducing possible negative economic and environmental impacts, with the use of a predictive tool that can assist in making informed decisions.

The HPWRA is a proactive screening method developed by scientists who were concerned about the number of introduced plant species that were becoming invasive in natural and agricultural environments. Invasive species are plants (or animals) introduced into a region they are not indigenous to that can harm the environment, the economy, or human health in this new area. The HPWRA system uses a series of 49 questions based on traits that contribute to a species’ ability to invade. The questions, which look at biogeographical origin, biology, ecology, weed status elsewhere, undesirable traits, and history of use, are used to predict whether the species has the potential to be invasive in Hawai‘i or other Pacific Islands. Scores for each question are added together, and based on the total score a species is rated low risk, “evaluate” (needs more information), or high risk for invasion potential. High-risk species may cause negative impacts to Hawai‘i.

While the HPWRA system was originally developed to screen a species before importation, it can also be used to choose low-risk species for sustainable agriculture, landscapes, and gardens, species that will not escape cultivation and negatively impact Hawai‘i’s biological uniqueness. Some of the species in this publication have been screened using the HPWRA system, and the ratings are included next to the species name. Over 1,000 species have been assessed to date. To find out whether a species has been screened, you can request the list of assessed species from the Weed Risk Assessment Specialists at hpwra@yahoo.com or access plants’ ratings at www.plantpono.org. If a species you are interested in has not yet been screened, you can request that the HRWRA specialists do so. While the HPWRA system is not legally binding, it allows us to make informed planting decisions that promote a sustainable Hawai‘i. More information about the HPWRA system is available at www.botany.hawaii.edu/faculty/daehler/wra/.

**References and Further Reading**


Green and White Plants

Agave angustifolia

Alocasia macrorrhiza 'Variegata'
Alpinia vittata

Ananas comosus ‘Tricolor’
Caladium bicolor ‘Candidum’

Calathea pseudoveitchiana

Chlorophytum comosum (low risk)
Cordyline fruticosa ‘Dwarf Mauna Kea’

Cordyline fruticosa ‘Poipu Hula’

Cordyline fruticosa ‘Tutu Elena’
Cordyline fruticosa 'Cascade'

Costus amazonicus

Costus speciosus 'Variegata'
Curcuma petiolata ‘Emperor’

Ctenanthe pilosa ‘Golden Mosaic’

Dieffenbachia ‘Tropic Marianne’ (a cultivar of Dieffenbachia seguine, which is high risk)

Dieffenbachia ‘Wilson’s Delight’
Dieffenbachia amoena ‘Tropic Snow’

Ficus aspera (clown ficus)

Ficus microcarpa ‘Variegata’ (though this cultivar has not been assessed, the species is high risk)

Ficus sagittata ‘Variegata’
**Globba** species ‘Ballerina’

**Guzmania** ‘Pax’ (this cultivar has an unknown parent)

**Liriope muscari** ‘Variegata’ (though this cultivar has not been assessed, the species is low risk)

**Neoregelia** species
Neoregelia compacta ‘Bossa Nova’

Stenotaphrum secundatum ‘Variegata’

Neoregelia ‘Pinwheel’

Syngonium podophyllum ‘White Butterfly’ (though this cultivar has not been assessed, the species is high risk)
Green and Yellow Plants

*Aechmea chantinii* ‘Samurai’

*Aechmea fasciata* ‘Variegata’ (though this cultivar has not been assessed, the species is low risk)

*Aechmea caudata* ‘Variegata’
*Aechmea mexicana* 'Marginata'

*Alpinia zerumbet* ‘Waimailo’ or ‘Variegata’ (though this cultivar has not been assessed, the species is high risk)

*Aechmea nudicaulis* 'Marginata'

*Ananas bracteatus striatus*
Bambusa vulgaris ‘Aureo-variegata’ (though this cultivar has not been assessed, the species is low risk)

Cordyline fruticosa ‘Bangkok Gold’
Cordyline fruticosa 'Dillingham'

Cryptanthus bromelioides 'Tricolor'

Dracaena fragrans 'Massangeana'
Epipremnum aureum

Ficus elastica ‘Gold’ (though this cultivar has not been assessed, the species is low risk)

Ficus elastica ‘Schrejeriana’ (though this cultivar has not been assessed, the species is low risk)
Nerium oleander ‘Variegata’ (though this cultivar has not been assessed, the species is low risk)

Pandanus tectorius ‘Variegata’

Dracaena reflexa ‘Song of India’

Vriesea fenestralis