



Enhancing Your *Lānai*, Balcony, or Patio with Container Plants

Richard Criley

Department of Tropical Plant and Soil Sciences

The environment of a *lānai* or an apartment balcony is generally not hospitable for plants. Winds dry the soil and dehydrate the foliage. The sun heats the pot, medium, and plant, causing poor root development, water loss, and stress on the photosynthetic factory. Soil microorganisms are also affected and exist at low populations.

While the environment may be inhospitable for plants, insects still seem to thrive. A lack of familiarity with plant needs (water, fertilizer, drainage, light) may lead the apartment dweller to ignore regular watering and fertilizing, cleaning, pruning, and examination for pests.

However, if plant selection and maintenance are done with proper forethought and care, *lānai* plants can enhance the outdoor environment.

Lānai plants may be grown in small or large pots made of plastic, ceramic, clay, or cement. Some may be as small as 2 inches across and others may be classified as tubs or even built-in planter boxes. The small amount of space on most lanai leads to crowding, double-decking, use of hanging baskets, and even over-the-rail window boxes (often frowned upon by condominium managers and owners' associations).

Plants in such containers must be carefully selected for color, form, vigor, tidiness, and adaptability to the conditions of the *lānai*. That said, there are many plants that will survive and even thrive if small modifications are made to this stressful environment.

Aspect

South-facing and west-facing *lānai* may almost be considered to have a different growing environment from north-facing and east-facing *lānai*. The sun's heat and

drying influence are great on the former, while Hawaii's trade winds exert their drying influence on the latter. Light intensity changes with the angle of the sun through the year, and a north-facing *lānai* may still have high morning light while providing shade in the afternoon.

Choice of container

The container must be heavy enough not to tip over with the plant in it, and large enough to support the plant's root system and be in proportion to the top growth of the plant. The pot must have drainage so water does not accumulate around the root system. Containers may be ornamental or merely functional.

Light-colored pots tend to reflect some of the incident light and heat that stress plant roots; dark-colored pots absorb heat and contribute to faster evaporation.

Choice of medium

There is no such thing as a perfect medium. It is common to buy plants at a garden center that have been grown in a porous, lightweight medium such as peatmoss and perlite. This medium dries readily, is difficult to re-wet, and is marginal in being heavy enough to keep a large-crowned plant from blowing over.

The bags of medium sold at garden centers may be satisfactory from the standpoint of holding moisture and providing drainage, but many fail the "weight" test.

The common practice of putting large rocks, broken clay pots, or coarse gravel in the bottom of the pot for drainage is probably better for weighing the pot down than providing drainage. This is because water tends to stay in the small pores of medium above the coarse drainage material rather than move into the large pores.

Watering

Water until you see water draining from the bottom of the container. As a general rule, let the plant approach a slight wilting point and the soil surface dry before the next watering. Because plant water requirements vary, not every plant will need the same amount of water.

It is a good idea to put plants together that have similar water requirements.

Lānai plant care

Fred D. Rauch and Paul R. Weissich, authors of *Plants for Tropical Landscapes: A Gardener's Guide* (University of Hawaii Press, 2000), offer some suggestions for enhancing the chances of success for *lānai* plants:

- Wash the foliage frequently to remove accumulated dust.
- Water whenever the soil surface is dry—not just on a schedule.
- Avoid letting water stand in the drainage saucer—at least more than an inch of it.
- Fertilize regularly—liquid and slow-release fertilizers are both easily applied.
- Turn the pots about a quarter turn once a week to expose all parts of the plant to maximum light.
- Know the rules for your building, especially with respect to the amount of weight the *lānai* is engineered to bear, preventing runoff of water onto the lanai below or onto the parking deck, and branches that overreach your space and shed leaves onto your neighbor's *lānai*.

Suggested plants for use on *lānai* and patios

Palms

Young palms will be attractive for a while, but they may have to be moved out as they grow larger.

Coconut—attractive up through the first 4 or 5 leaf stage.

Fishtail palm—good dark green foliage; tends to spread out as it puts on more leaves.

Pigmy date palm—light, airy, but leaflets at base of the frond are very sharp!

Cascade palm—makes good tubbed specimen, but requires some protection from drying winds; good for

partially shaded environments.

Bamboo palm—good in tubs; fast growing; makes a good screen; needs some protection from drying winds.

Areca palm—one of the most common for container culture; multi-stemmed; tends to be golden yellow in high light (this is normal!); requires well drained, fertile soil and lots of water.

Bottle palm—young plants have a swollen base and stiff horizontal fronds; full sun, moderate watering.

Lady palm—slow growing, dark green; tolerates shade well; somewhat tolerant of drought and salt; excellent as potted plant; variegated forms highly prized in Japan.

Manila palm—young plants are attractive as container specimens; easy to grow from seed; full sun to moderate shade; moderate drought and salt tolerance.

Tropical vines

Many flowering vines have good tolerance of high light and winds. They do need some managing to keep them in bounds. Most vines will need some support, such as a small trellis.

Bougainvillea—vigorous; good color; avoid over-watering and high-nitrogen fertilizers; prune back to stimulate the new wood on which flowers are borne.

Pandorea—bears trumpet-shaped, rose-pink to white flowers; tends to be somewhat seasonal in its blooming.

Pink trumpet vine (*Podranea*)—sprawling shrub with showy clusters of pink flowers much of the year; good wind and drought tolerance.

Orange trumpet vine, huapala—grows rapidly; seasonal display of pendent orange flowers; full sun.

Philodendron—numerous species; require shaded conditions without too much wind; train on trellis or pole; hanging baskets.

Stephanotis—fragrant, waxy, white flowers in spring

and summer; heat tolerant and flowers best in full sun; prune back when too vigorous to stimulate the new wood on which flowers are borne.

Passionflower (passionfruit)—blue, pinkish, and red flowered kinds available; needs strong trellis or support and good drainage; moderate drought tolerance; full sunlight; wind tolerant.

Yellow orchid vine—leathery, dark green foliage with clusters of bright yellow flowers most of the year; full sun to partial shade; moderate tolerance of wind, drought, salt.

Woody plants

Hilo holly—shiny, dark green leaves with clusters of red berries; slow growing; requires at least partial shade; has escaped cultivation and invaded some areas.

Okinawan holly—has two leaf types: basal leaves that are dainty and prickly, and smooth-margined leaves borne on upright stems.

Heavenly bamboo—multiple compound leaves on upright stems; numerous forms available, including variegated and dwarf; sun and shade tolerant; needs moist soil; clusters of white flowers are followed by red berries.

Song of India, Song of Jamaica—small, variegated leaves (India has yellow margins, Jamaica has chartreuse central banding) borne closely on somewhat droopy branches; requires some pruning to shape and may require staking early on until strong enough to stand upright; partial shade; moist, well drained soil.

Acalypha—many leaf types, but a form with elongated, irregular shape and pink margins makes a good container plant; highly variegated bigger-leaved forms are magnets for spiraling whitefly and mealybugs; full sunlight for best color.

Desert rose, *Adenium*—slow grower with rather succulent branches; bears white, pink, red, or bi-colored flowers; tolerant of heat, drought, and wind but needs light, well drained soil and moderate watering; popular lanai plant; mealybugs a problem.

Caricature plant—numerous leaf color forms in irregular variegation patterns: bronze, pink, yellow, green, gray-green; sun or shade; tolerant of severe pruning when plants get too large.

Ixora—dark, evergreen leaves; clusters of white, pink, red, red-orange, or yellow flowers; needs regular feeding and watering; maintain a soil pH of 5.5 because higher pH can cause yellowing; needs well drained soil to maintain a healthy root system; small-leaved forms are slower growing and more compact than big-leaved forms; scale and mealybug insects are problems and contribute to leaves blackened by sooty mold fungus; high light for best flowering.

Pikake—easy to grow, but excessive nitrogen fertilizer and watering cause long, sprawling stems; needs regular pruning after flowering to induce new short flowering shoots; tolerates heat, drought, some wind; attractive to mites.

Lantana—has a reputation as a thorny, invasive pasture weed, but new selections have no thorns and a compact growth habit and a variety of flower colors; a compact golden yellow variety makes a good planter-box or hanging-basket plant; there are trailing forms with pinkish-lavender flowers; shear the plant to keep it compact; avoid excessive watering; grow in high light for best flowering; an insect imported to control the pasture weed can attack the flower clusters of cultivated plants.

Shrimp plant—tends to be a bit floppy, but careful pruning can keep it compact; two colors: red or yellow, and also a variegated leaf form; somewhat drought tolerant; sun or partial shade.

Fire spike—a relative of the shrimp plant, but more upright with larger leaves; terminal clusters of small, bright red flowers; full sun or partial shade; can be too vigorous if watered or fertilized heavily, so prune it—it can take it!

Lollipop plant—another shrimp plant relative, bearing upright spikes of yellow bracts with white flowers; full sun or partial shade; protect from strong winds.

Pittosporum—several forms of this native of Japan have

been introduced; a compact form known as ‘Wheeler’s Dwarf’ is a good selection for containers; full sun or light shade; moist well drained soil; good wind tolerance.

Panax, Ming aralia—several species contribute to the group of plants we call panax; the dark green, finely divided leaf types called Ming aralia are popular for shaded or full-sun lanai and can also be adapted to interior culture (but don’t shift them between inside and outside, as the leaves will fall off with the change of environments); upright growing, useful for screening; moderate drought tolerance; maintain adequate moisture to avoid losing the lower foliage; mealybugs like the leaf axils.

False eranthemum—several leaf types, some with irregular patterns of purple to pink and gray-green to creamy yellow and another form with yellow veins; flowers are either whitish with pink spots or rose-pink with dark pink spots; shrubby and tolerant to pruning; full sun or partial shade.

Indian hawthorn, yeddo hawthorn, kokutan—evergreen, leathery leaves; shrubby growth, but slow growing; full sun to light shade; fertile, well drained soil; good tolerance of wind, drought, salt.

Yellow-throated rondeletia—an uncommon plant, even in gardens; small, dark green leaves, clusters of red-orange flowers, somewhat like lantana; slow growing and shrubby; wind tolerant and somewhat drought tolerant; full sun for best flowering.

Firecracker plant, *lōkālia*—sprawling, fine textured shrub with cascades of tubular red flowers; very drought and wind tolerant; full sun for best flowering; because of its drooping habit, it is often used in planters in parking garages, but it can also be managed as a hanging basket.

West Indian holly, *leea*—upright grower with shiny, multiple-divided leaves; terminal flower clusters followed by clusters of red to black fruits; a purplish-red leaf form also available; good for screening; full sun to light shade; fertile, well drained soil, but needs even moisture; susceptible to spiraling whitefly.

Hibiscus—many flower types (large/small, upright/pendent, single/double) and a great range of colors; the large hybrids are somewhat more difficult to keep going than the more common, single, hedge types; flowers last but one day; shrubby, and can be kept compact with pruning; mealybugs, mites, aphids, thrips, whitefly—you name it and hibiscus can attract it—still, popular for their color contribution; keep nutrition up for flowering and be observant for flower bud drop, which signals insect or mite attack; red-flowered hibiscus can also develop galls on the leaves as a result of the erineum mite; full sun to partial shade; heat and somewhat drought tolerant.

Dwarf schefflera—irregular, shrubby growth with long-lived, dark green, compound leaves; good wind and drought tolerance; full sun to shade; tolerates pruning and training; attractive variegated forms are available.

Croton—many shapes and colors of foliage make this one of the choices for container color; thrives under full sun but will tolerate interior conditions as well when acclimatized to the low light conditions; fertile, well drained soil, regular fertilizing and watering; not forgiving of drought (drops the leaves), but well established plants will re-leaf; tolerant of pruning to shape and improve compactness.

Dwarf clusea—uncommon in gardens, but a more compact and shrubby plant than its cousin the autograph tree; medium green leaves; full sun to partial shade.

Crown of thorns—Thai nurseries have come up with many new hybrids that are very tolerant of the dry, windy, high-light conditions found on many lanai; beyond these, however, are a number of novelty selections, including some miniature ones.

Sansevieria—these are tough plants that stand full sun, partial shade, drought, wind, and moderate neglect; many species to choose from, from tall to compact, with flat to rounded leaves, and with many kinds of variegations and growth habits; some are named cultivars, while others are relatively unknown species; all are adaptable to pot culture; need good drainage; avoid over-watering.