

FLORIDA LEADS NATION IN FOLIAGE PLANT PRODUCTION

By Ralph E. Mitchell, Director/Horticulture Agent - UF/IFAS Extension Service, Charlotte County

You might be surprised to learn that Florida is now the leading state in the production of foliage plants. When you think of foliage plants, think about rubber plants, Boston ferns, Chinese evergreens, and the heart-leaf philodendron - just to name a few. By definition, a foliage plant is grown primarily for its interesting or colorful leaves for use as an indoor decoration, and not for its flowers or fruit. Florida production of these plants saw foliage sales reach \$462.5 million in 2007. Over 500 types of tropical and subtropical foliage plants are currently being grown for this large industry.

When did people first use plants for indoor decoration? The literature suggests that the Sumerians and Egyptians began growing

trees in containers around 3,500 years ago. The Chinese were also noted for using plants indoors. European travelers and explorers collected plants from Asia and the East Indies and introduced them back into their home countries. Collecting and cultivating indoor plants became a hobby of royalty and aristocrats in conservatories and indoor plants were a normal part of a Victorian house. European production and sale of foliage plants to the United States eventually moved to California and Florida which had a much better climate for this type of horticultural crop. Kentia palms and pothos were part of the California industry in the 1920's. By the 1940's they also produced the heartleaf philodendron and the Norfolk Island pine.



Crops of English ivy (Hedera helix) being cultivated at a Florida greenhouse

photo courtesy of <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>

Florida also had the climate for growing foliage plants and has had an industry since about 1912 when Boston ferns were the crop. Another favorite, the heartleaf philodendron, began to be grown in Florida in 1928. By the 1930's, the Chinese evergreen and the rubber tree were in commercial production. As years went by, more plants were added and propagation techniques were improved. Tissue-culture allowed for even faster production of foliage plants. Plant breeding, mutations and hybridization continually kept new and interesting foliage plants coming to market. 1999 Florida foliage industry statistics shows that, for example, there are now 54 types of ferns, 22 varieties of palms, 46 cultivars of

ficus, and 33 types of Dracaena in production.

Good features of foliage plants include their ability to tolerate low-light conditions that are found in their natural habitat of a shaded tropical or subtropical forest. Low-light conditions are also found indoors whether in a mall or a living room. Check out your local garden center for a myriad of colorful and attractive potted foliage plants good for indoors or even as selected decorative features on a patio or deck.

Resource:

Henny, R.J. & Chen, J. (2008) Tropical Foliage Cultivar Development: New Introductions Drive Plant Markets. UF/IFAS Extension Service.

USDA/National Agricultural Statistics Service/FDACs, (2008), Foliage, Floriculture and Cut Greens, Orlando, FL.

For more information on all types of foliage plant subject matter, please contact our Master Gardeners on the Plant Lifeline at 941.764.4340 from 1:00pm-4:00pm Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. Our office is located at 25550 Harbor View Road, Suite 3, in Port Charlotte. Our Plant Clinics are available across the county:

- **Demonstration Garden** (6900 Florida Street, PG) Thursdays 9:00am-11:00am.
- **Englewood/Charlotte Public Library** Thursdays 10:00am-1:00pm.
- **Mid-County Regional Library** 1st and 3rd Thursday of month 1:00pm-3:00pm.
- **Edison College Learning Resources Library** 3rd Tuesday of month 1:00pm-4:00pm.

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For more information about our Florida Yards and Neighborhoods Program, please contact our FYN Horticulture Program Assistant, Allison Steele, at 941.764.4351. Allison can help educate you about the Florida Yards & Neighborhoods Program so that you can create a beautiful, Florida-Friendly landscape that saves you time and money while conserving precious water resources and reducing pollution.