



Caring for a Tropical Garden

General Principles for the Gold Coast:

Gold Coast's climate, particularly along the coast, is subtropical, characterized by:

- **Warm to hot temperatures year-round:** This is ideal for many tropical plants, but also means careful management of heat stress.
- **High humidity:** While good for tropical plants, it can also encourage fungal diseases.
- **Distinct wet and dry seasons:** The wet season (summer) brings abundant rainfall, while the dry season (winter) can be quite dry, especially inland.

2. Soil Health is Key

Tropical plants thrive in rich, well-draining soil.

- **Improve soil with organic matter:** Regularly incorporate compost, well-rotted manure, and leaf mould. In tropical areas, gardeners often layer the soil with these materials rather than digging deep, mimicking a rainforest floor.
- **Mulching:** Apply a generous layer of mulch (bark, compost, cypress, or even shredded pruning material) around your plants. This is crucial for:
 - Retaining soil moisture
 - Keeping roots cool
 - Suppressing weed growth
 - Adding nutrients as it decomposes
- **Avoid compaction:** Don't over-walk on your garden beds, as this can compact the soil and restrict root growth. The same goes for pets or animals.
- **Drainage:** Ensure good drainage, especially in the wet season, to prevent root rot. For heavy clay soils, add gypsum. Consider raised garden beds or ag-pipe drainage if waterlogging is an issue.
- **pH levels:** High rainfall can increase soil acidity. Periodically check your soil pH and add lime or dolomite if it's too acidic.

3. Watering Wisely

Watering is critical, especially during dry periods and for establishing new plants.

- **Timing:** Water early in the morning or late in the afternoon to minimize evaporation. This allows water to soak into the soil before the sun's intensity.
- **Deep watering:** Water deeply and less frequently to encourage roots to grow deeper, making plants more resilient.

- **Check soil moisture:** Don't just follow a schedule. Before watering, check the soil moisture by hand (about 50mm down). If it's dry, it's time to water.
- **Efficient methods:** Consider drip irrigation systems or soaker hoses to deliver water directly to the roots, reducing waste.
- **Rainwater harvesting:** Collect and use rainwater for your garden where possible.
- **Winter watering:** In cooler months, tropical plants slow their growth. Reduce watering to once every 4-5 days (less if there's rain) and ensure the soil has time to dry out to prevent fungal problems and root rot.

4. Plant Selection

Choosing the right plants for your specific conditions is paramount for a low-maintenance, thriving tropical garden.

- **Native and drought-tolerant plants:** Opt for species adapted to Queensland's climate. Examples include:
 - **Palms:** Foxtail palm, golden cane palm, kentia palm, rhaps palm.
 - **Shrubs and trees:** Elaeocarpus Eumundii, Waterhousea, Native Gardenia, Banksia, Cordyline, Frangipani, Hibiscus, Gardenia, Lilly Pilly, Heliconia, Alocasia (Elephant Ears), Bromeliad
 - **Groundcovers and smaller plants:** Dichondra, Ixora 'coral fire', croton, Flax Lily (Dianella), Spider Lily, Agave or succulent species, Ferns, Philodendron, Bird of Paradise.
- **Consider microclimates:** Group plants with similar water and light requirements. Tall trees and palms can create a canopy that provides shade and a humid microclimate for understory plants.
- **Foliage focus:** Tropical gardens often rely on lush, varied foliage for year-round appeal. Choose plants with different leaf shapes, sizes, textures, and colours to create contrast.
- **Pest-repelling plants:** Incorporate plants like marjoram, oregano, marigolds, lavender, garlic, basil, sage, and rosemary to naturally deter pests.

5. Maintenance Practices

Regular maintenance is essential to keep a tropical garden looking its best.

- **Pruning:** Tropical plants can grow rapidly, especially during the wet season. Regular pruning is necessary to:
 - Maintain shape and size
 - Encourage new growth and flowering
 - Improve air circulation to reduce fungal issues
 - Remove dead or diseased branches and spent flowers.
- **Feeding:**
 - Use a slow-release fertilizer to provide a steady supply of nutrients.
 - Avoid over-fertilisation, especially on hot days, as it can burn plants.
 - Don't fertilise during the non-growing season (late winter).
 - Supplement with a mulch of organic manure each spring and a seaweed solution spray once a season to keep plants robust.
- **Pest and Disease Management:**
 - Monitor your plants regularly for signs of pests or diseases.
 - Employ natural pest control methods like neem oil sprays or introduce beneficial insects (e.g., ladybirds).
 - Ensure good air circulation, as high humidity can encourage fungal problems. Anti-fungal sprays (like Mancozeb Plus) can be used preventatively or curatively.
 - Be aware of invasive weeds in Queensland and report any unusual sightings to Biosecurity Queensland (13 25 23). Do not attempt to treat or dispose of suspect exotic weeds yourself.

- **Weeding:** While mulch helps, some weeding will still be required. Keep lawn areas to a minimum in tropical garden designs, as they require more time for mowing and weeding.
- **Sun safety:** When gardening, always wear full sun protection and try to garden in the cooler parts of the day.

By following these tips, you can create and maintain a vibrant, lush tropical garden that thrives in the Queensland climate.