

Ficus elastica: Rubber Tree¹

Edward F. Gilman, Dennis G. Watson, Ryan W. Klein, Andrew K. Koeser, Deborah R. Hilbert, and Drew C. McLean²

Introduction

Often seen as an interior container plant, rubber tree has large, 3½- to 12-inch-long, thick, glossy evergreen leaves, multiple trunks, and a spreading, irregular canopy. Able to reach 100 feet in height in its native habitat in the jungle but most often seen at about 35 to 45 feet in the landscape, rubber tree is useful as a screen, shade, patio, or specimen tree. Its coarse texture makes a strong statement in the landscape. Use as a street tree is limited by the tree's tendency to break apart in strong winds. Perhaps the tree could be made stronger by removing branches with weak tight-angle crotches and spacing major lateral branches along one central trunk. Eliminate multiple trunks early in the life of the tree and prune lateral branches so they remain smaller than half the diameter of the trunk to increase longevity in the landscape.

General Information

Scientific name: *Ficus elastica*

Pronunciation: FYE-kuss ee-LASS-tick-uh

Common name(s): rubber tree, India-rubber fig

Family: *Moraceae*

USDA hardiness zones: 10B through 11 (Figure 2)

Origin: native to India and Malaysia

UF/IFAS Invasive Assessment Status: not considered a problem species at this time, may be recommended (North, Central, South)

Uses: shade; trained as a standard; indoors; screen; specimen; deck or patio; container or planter; espalier; highway median



Figure 1. Full Form—*Ficus elastica*: Rubber tree

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2. Edward F. Gilman, professor emeritus, Environmental Horticulture Department; Dennis G. Watson, former associate professor, Agricultural Engineering Department; Ryan W. Klein, graduate assistant, Environmental Horticulture Department; Andrew K. Koeser, assistant professor, Environmental Horticulture Department, UF/IFAS Gulf Coast Research and Education Center; Deborah R. Hilbert, graduate assistant, Environmental Horticulture Department, GCREC; and Drew C. McLean, biological scientist, Environmental Horticulture Department, GCREC; UF/IFAS Extension, Gainesville, FL 32611.

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Figure 2. Range

Description

Height: 35 to 45 feet
Spread: 25 to 30 feet
Crown uniformity: symmetrical
Crown shape: oval
Crown density: dense
Growth rate: fast
Texture: coarse

Foliage

Leaf arrangement: alternate
Leaf type: simple
Leaf margin: entire
Leaf shape: elliptic (oval)
Leaf venation: pinnate, brachidodrome
Leaf type and persistence: evergreen, broadleaf evergreen
Leaf blade length: 3½ to 12 inches
Leaf color: emerge red but turn dark glossy green
Fall color: no color change
Fall characteristic: not showy

Flower

Flower color: unknown
Flower characteristics: not showy; emerge inside the fleshy fruit produced by this tree

Fruit

Fruit shape: egg-shaped
Fruit length: ½ inch
Fruit covering: fleshy fig
Fruit color: greenish-yellow
Fruit characteristics: does not attract wildlife; not showy; fruit/leaves a litter problem
Fruiting: early summer



Figure 3. Leaf—*Ficus elastica*: Rubber tree

Trunk and Branches

Trunk/branches: branches droop; not showy; typically one trunk; no thorns
Bark: brown, smooth, or slightly rough
Pruning requirement: needed for strong structure
Breakage: susceptible to breakage
Current year twig color: green
Current year twig thickness: thick
Wood specific gravity: unknown



Figure 4. Bark—*Ficus elastica*: Rubber tree
 Credits: Gitta Hasing

Culture

Light requirement: full sun to partial shade

Soil tolerances: clay; sand; loam; alkaline; acidic; occasionally wet; well-drained

Drought tolerance: high

Aerosol salt tolerance: moderate

Other

Roots: can form large surface roots

Winter interest: no

Outstanding tree: no

Ozone sensitivity: unknown

Verticillium wilt susceptibility: unknown

Pest resistance: resistant to pests/diseases

Use and Management

Rubber tree will grow quickly in sun or partial shade on almost any well-drained soil. The soil should be allowed to become fairly dry between waterings, especially in containers. Rubber tree makes a nice house plant if it is not over-watered.

Cultivars include 'Doescheri', which has yellow-variegated leaves; 'Decora' with broad, reddish-green leaves with ivory-colored veins running down center of leaf; and 'Variegata' with light green leaves with white or yellow margins.

Propagation is by layering or cuttings.

Pests and Diseases

No pests or diseases are of major concern but occasionally scales are a problem.

References

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