Variegated Elephant Food

Portulacaria afra 'Variegata'



Variegated Elephant Food foliage
Photo courtesy of NetPS Plant Finder

Height: 6 feet

Spread: 4 feet

Sunlight: ○ ◐

Hardiness Zone: (annual)

Other Names: Dwarf Jade Plant, Rainbow Bush

Description:

An upright plant with interesting reddish-brown stems covered in small succulent green leaves with cream variegation; grows large in frost free areas; popular use in bonsai; very drought tolerant and great for rock gardens or containers

Ornamental Features

Variegated Elephant Food is primarily valued in the landscape or garden for its ornamental upright and spreading habit of growth. It features dainty lavender flowers at the ends of the branches in early summer. Its attractive small succulent round leaves remain green in color with showy creamy white variegation and tinges of pink throughout the season. The brick red stems are very colorful and add to the overall interest of the plant.



Variegated Elephant Food
Photo courtesy of NetPS Plant Finder

Landscape Attributes

Variegated Elephant Food is a multi-stemmed annual with an upright spreading habit of growth. It brings an extremely fine and delicate texture to the garden composition and should be used to full effect.

This is a relatively low maintenance plant, and can be pruned at anytime. Gardeners should be aware of the following characteristic(s) that may warrant special consideration;

- Insects

Variegated Elephant Food is recommended for the following landscape applications;

- Accent
- Mass Planting
- Rock/Alpine Gardens
- General Garden Use
- Container Planting



Variegated Elephant Food foliage
Photo courtesy of NetPS Plant Finder

Planting & Growing

Variegated Elephant Food will grow to be about 6 feet tall at maturity, with a spread of 4 feet. It has a low canopy with a typical clearance of 1 foot from the ground. Although it's not a true annual, this slow-growing plant can be expected to behave as an annual in our climate if left outdoors over the winter, usually needing replacement the following year. As such, gardeners should take into consideration that it will perform differently than it would in its native habitat.

This plant does best in full sun to partial shade. It prefers dry to average moisture levels with very well-drained soil, and will often die in standing water. It is considered to be drought-tolerant, and thus makes an ideal choice for a low-water garden or xeriscape application. It is not particular as to soil pH, but grows best in poor soils, and is able to handle environmental salt. It is highly tolerant of urban pollution and will even thrive in inner city environments. This is a selected variety of a species not originally from North America. It can be propagated by cuttings; however, as a cultivated variety, be aware that it may be subject to certain restrictions or prohibitions on propagation.

Variegated Elephant Food is a fine choice for the garden, but it is also a good selection for planting in outdoor pots and containers. With its upright habit of growth, it is best suited for use as a 'thriller' in the 'spiller-thriller-filler' container combination; plant it near the center of the pot, surrounded by smaller plants and those that spill over the edges. It is even sizeable enough that it can be grown alone in a suitable container. Note that when growing plants in outdoor containers and baskets, they may require more frequent waterings than they would in the yard or garden.