



Fiery Flowers of the Desert

By Jan Cleere

“Very pretty” does not begin to describe the beauty abounding in the fiery Red Bird of Paradise that defies Arizona’s summer sun and blooms profusely throughout the hottest of days. But that is exactly what the name means. The Red Bird of Paradise (*caesalpinia pulcherrima*) is one of the hardiest blossoms to grace our desert landscape.

Feathery, fern-like tropical leaves depict the Red Bird of Paradise’s history of West Indies origin where it is known as the Pride of Barbados. Who wouldn’t be proud of such a profusion of color? This is one plant that can be counted on to bloom all summer long no matter what the temperature reads. I have managed to neglect them, over water them, watch the javelina eat their leaves and blossoms to stumps; yet they continue to bloom summer after summer despite my minimal ministrings.

A member of the Fabaceae or pea family, the Red Bird of Paradise is a staple in Arizona gardens, attracting hummingbirds, bees and butterflies with its brilliance and 6-inch long crimson stamens. The flames of this delicate looking plant shimmer in the sunlight along park trails, around swimming pools and among countless business and residential landscapes.

Don’t confuse your Birds of Paradise. Three species of *caesalpinia* thrive throughout Arizona. Even though the showy Red Bird of Paradise with its border of glittering gold is sometimes mistakenly called Mexican Bird of Paradise, the true *caesalpinia mexicana* produces sun kissed, yellow blossoms and is just as heat tolerant as its red cousin and even more frost hardy. The tree-like Mexican Bird of Paradise can grow up to 15 feet tall while the bushy red bird usually tops out at 6 to 10 feet.

Desert Bird of Paradise or Bird of Paradise Bush, aka *caesalpinia gilliesii*, also produces yellow blossoms but with startling red stamens bursting from its center. This species also grows more like a tree and is not as frost sensitive as the red bird. Desert Birds of Paradise grow wild along southeastern Arizona roads where heat is less devastating and precipitation exceeds the Phoenix norm. They also flourish in Northern Arizona climates in protected areas such as sheltered patios or within an overgrown foliage menagerie.

Whichever species you prefer, Birds of Paradise requires little care beyond a well-drained soil bed. In fact, clay soils and over watering are two things they will not tolerate. Imagine a plant that actually likes our arid climate! For consistent growth and bright green foliage, water deeply periodically during summer months but don’t worry if you take a few weeks off – these plants will forgive you. Fertilize and mulch for more rapid growth but it’s not necessary to feed these plants anything but H₂O.

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Around February, or when frost danger has passed (or whenever the mood strikes you), cut stalks down to 6 or 8 inches. If you forget to prune, your plants will still regrow even if frozen to the ground, but will have a somewhat ragged appearance. A well-trimmed Bird of Paradise comes back fuller and more prolific.

In the Phoenix area, look for Red Birds of Paradise to grow twice as tall after a warm winter season. Little deters them from spreading out beyond a designated area so leave plenty of room for expansion. Don't place too close to pools as spent blossoms drop and stain.

Birds of Paradise develop seedpods as the summer season wanes into autumn. Collect the pods and keep the seeds for next season if you want even more birds flowering your garden. Place in a paper bag and keep in a cool dry place over the winter. In the early spring, sand the seeds lightly and soak in warm water for several hours to enhance germination. Plant in containers until seedlings reach 1 to 2 feet tall, then place in the ground 5 to 6 feet apart. The seedlings will grow slowly the first year and take off rapidly once established.

As seedpods turn dark brown in the autumn and drop from the bush, they burst open and curl into tight tubes resembling cigars. Seeds dispersed from spent pods are toxic so keep out reach of small hands and pets by removing from the ground. Dried pods add a decorative touch to fall artistry; use them in a harvest wreath or festive autumn table arrangement.

So next summer when you spot one of nature's more unique flowering plants along a roadside or in your neighbor's garden, step out of your air-conditioned car and admire the Bird of Paradise's strength and persistence in our grueling climate. Its beauty will astound you.