



NEWSPAPER ARTICLES

Red Bird of Paradise (May 13, 2023)

by Rosie Bonar, Tulare/Kings Counties Master Gardener

I have long been familiar with the Bird of Paradise plant. It has an interesting and unusual orange or yellow and blue flower that resembles a bird. It grows in warm climates. But I have recently become aware of other plants that have the same common name. That can lead to some confusion, which is why it is always a good idea to become somewhat familiar with the scientific name of plants you are interested in.

The Red Bird of Paradise flower does not look like a bird. **Caesalpinia pulcherrima** is the scientific name. (It's no wonder they call it the red bird of paradise! Who could remember or pronounce that scientific name? I suggest you write it down before going to a nursery!)

The Red Bird of Paradise is a thorny evergreen shrub that can grow in zones 9-11. It is a member of the pea family. It is a native to the tropics or subtropics, although its exact origin is unknown because it is so widely cultivated. It is primarily a desert dweller. It will lose its leaves if the temperatures get below freezing, but they will likely grow back in the spring. Considered a winter-dormant plant, it blooms repeatedly in the spring and into the early fall with strikingly-bright red-orange flowers that resemble clustered azalea flowers.

Description:

This shrub has medium green, compound leaves and can grow up to 8 feet tall and 8 feet wide. The flowers grow on a stalk or raceme that extends about 2 feet above the rest of the plant. The shape and color of the flower make it very attractive to hummingbirds and other pollinators. It blooms from March to October. The flowers have long stamens that extend past the petals. It makes a beautiful accent plant with its height, lacy foliage, and brightly colored flowers. Be sure to allow enough room for it to grow and not need to be pruned or cut. It can grow in full sun and is heat tolerant, which makes it a nice choice for a landscape plant in Tulare-Kings Counties.

Maintenance:

The Red Bird of Paradise grows best in full sun with well-draining soil. It doesn't do well in clay soils. It is well adapted to normal winter rains and periodic deep irrigation in the summer. Cutting back the first flush of blooms when they begin to fade will encourage a second flush later in the summer or early fall. Prune the shrub in the winter to shape and control its size. Cutting it back to within a foot of the ground every couple of years will invigorate it. Planting it near the house in the back of the flower bed will give it some frost protection, although it is hardy to 28 degrees.

This is a drought tolerant, beautiful plant. Although it isn't a native to California, I am very tempted to find the perfect spot in my yard for it.

Other plants with the common name of bird of paradise:

1. **Strelitzia reginae** is the Bird of Paradise plant you might be most familiar with. It has long leathery leaves that are similar to the banana tree. The flowers rest on a rigid stalk and are composed of orange and blue petals. They look like the head and crown of an exotic bird. It is a native of South Africa. This bird of Paradise is often used as a florist's flower. It can grow in our zones 9-11 as an outdoor perennial or as a houseplant, but does best in temperatures between 65-80 degrees.

2. *Strelitzia nicolai* is known as the giant white bird of paradise or wild banana. It is quite a lot larger than the *S. reginae* and can grow to be 20 feet tall. The flowers closely resemble the *S. reginae* flowers but with white petals instead of orange and bluish-purple.
3. *Caesalpinia mexicana*, or the Mexican Bird of Paradise, is closely related to the red bird of paradise. It is a broad-leaved evergreen tree or shrub, but the flowers are an orangish-yellow instead of red. It is more tolerant of cold, remaining evergreen to 15 degrees. It is native to Northern Mexico and can live in zones 8-11.
4. *Caesalpinia gilliesii* or the Yellow Bird of Paradise is another plant in the same family as the Red Bird of Paradise and the Mexican Bird of Paradise. This plant is evergreen in warm climates and has yellow flowers with long red stamens. It is native to Argentina and Uruguay. The seeds are expelled when the seed pods dry and can escape into surrounding areas, thus becoming invasive. It can grow to be 7-10 feet tall and is hardy in zones 8-11.

The Tulare-Kings Counties Master Gardeners will answer your questions in person:

Visalia Farmer's Market- 1st & 3rd Saturdays, 8-11 am, 2100 W. Caldwell Ave (behind Sears)

May 13 – Luis Nursery Plant Clinic, 139 S. Mariposa Ave, Visalia, 10 am – 2 pm

May 20 - Hofman's Nursery Plant Clinic, 12491 W Lacey, Hanford, 10 am – 1 pm

May 20 -Visalia Farmers' Market, 2100 W. Caldwell Ave (behind Sears), 8-11 am

May 20 - Tulare Library Class on Lawn Removal, 11 am – 12 pm

Questions? Call the Master Gardeners:

Tulare County: (559) 684-3325, Tues & Thurs, 9:30-11:30;

Kings County: (559) 852-2736, Thursday Only, 9:30-11:30 a.m

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