

## Bird of paradise



*Bird of Paradise*

Of the many shrubs that bloom during triple-digit temperatures, perhaps the most dramatic is the bird of paradise. More than one kind of striking plant has the common name “Bird of Paradise.” Each produces exquisite flowers; however, they are members of two very different plant groupings. While both originated in tropical regions, only members of one of these families thrive in our challenging southern Nevada environment. Our local Birds of Paradise are named after an Italian botanist – *Caesalpinia* - and are very distinct

from the other plant, *Strelitzia*. Those flowers often appear in cut flower arrangements – blue and orange, like the tropical bird. If you look on the internet for “bird of paradise”, that is the plant described. (Yet another demonstration of why it is better to use botanical rather than common names.)

The fast-growing varieties that appear in desert landscapes are planted for their astonishing flowers, produced in great displays of yellow or red-orange for a large part of the year. Most common in the Mojave area is the Red Bird of Paradise: *Caesalpinia pulcherrima*. A Yellow Bird of Paradise also tolerates our salty, dry, infertile soils, and wild temperature range.

People appreciate the fabulous vibrant flowers, both the red and the yellow, but they also attract hummingbirds and butterflies. Swallowtail, Sulphur and Skipper butterflies all use them as a nectar source.

From a distance, it looks as if these are single large flowers, but they are actually bouquets, masses of flowers appearing together at the end of the stem. They have eye-catching red stamens extending out beyond the petals. If they have been pollinated, a hard seedpod appears after flowers have past. Seeds are the main ways that these plants are propagated. Some controversy exists over the toxicity level of the seeds, but most authorities recommend against eating them, especially if they are green.

Both *Caesalpinia* species are usually grown as bushes, but can be pruned into slender trees. Their finely cut foliage is a subtle backdrop for the spectacular floral display. Like other members of the beans and peas family, their roots usually form associations with soil microbes that help the plant survive and improve soil fertility

Bird of Paradise is generally a successful plant in desert landscapes, doing very well in full sun. Even our soils and our weather extremes do not kill it. Some of the top growth may freeze during exceptionally cold periods (below freezing), but the plant will usually come back as long the roots are not damaged. It can survive drought. What it cannot tolerate is **poor drainage**. Without good drainage, roots sit in stagnant mud. Root rotting organisms take over, resulting in plant death.

Bird of Paradise will drop its leaves in the winter. New foliage appears in early summer, followed by the unmistakable flowers. They may, rarely, grow as tall and wide as 12 feet. More often, they reach half that size. They do well when pruned regularly and properly. Proper pruning, along with good drainage, will help them grow sturdy, producing an unmistakable show of glorious blossoms.

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