

Desert Bird of Paradise

In the middle of a Mojave Desert summer, flowers are usually not so plentiful as they are in spring. Since blossoms are the means by which plants attract pollinators and ultimately can produce their seeds, it can be difficult for them to reproduce when temperatures exceed 100°. Despite this challenge, some durable plants will flower enthusiastically even when it is hot. We all recognize lantana and leucophyllum (“Texas Ranger”) for their summer flowers, but they are not the only choices.



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grasses and bananas than to the desert plant of the same name. The tropical one does best in hot and humid tropical areas. These places receive much less direct sun and much more water than we who live in the Mojave could apply with a good conscience. In other words, that tropical plant with its big leaves and gorgeous flowers is not a terrific choice for Southern Nevada gardens. Large leaves will often be damaged by our fierce winds, and they tend to use and lose significant amounts of water.

The desert plant is quite happy growing under our conditions. Experts are unclear whether it originated in the desert southwest or in the West Indies, but wherever it came from, it now grows in cultivation in many dry hot areas. The desert bird of paradise produces flowers throughout the summer. Not only are they a spectacular sight, they **really** prosper in our climate.

One of my favorite desert shrubs is the Bird of Paradise. Not only is this a lovely plant with great flowers, it is a beautiful sight in the summer when other plants are suffering. It is also a legume. Legumes are capable of forming associations with soil organisms to “fix” nitrogen into chemical forms that the plant uses to create proteins. We generally grow two species of desert bird of paradise – red, *Caesalpinia pulcherrima*, and Mexican, *Caesalpinia mexicana*. The red variety has mainly yellow to orange petals and an abundance of red stamens. The Mexican type has yellow stamens.

Do not confuse this sturdy desert native with the tropical plant of the same name. The two could not be more dissimilar. Both are gorgeous, and wonderful additions to their appropriate landscapes, but the landscapes where they can thrive are very different. The tropical plant, whose flower really does look quite bird-like, is indigenous to South Africa. It is more closely related to

Even these plants cannot grow without any assistance. The soils in residential or commercial properties are often infertile, and may or may not have good drainage. Amend the soil with a small amount of compost to improve both fertility and drainage. Plant it in full sun and water it infrequently.

The shrub, which can grow to ten feet tall, will thrive under conditions that destroy most plants. Even this tough garden addition it is not indestructible, however. If you want to kill it, place it in a shady spot with poor drainage, or just overwater it on a regular basis. That will destroy it in short order.

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