

KINGMAN IS GROWING! Column

Birds of Paradise have many feathers

By **Laura Murphy**, Mohave County Area Master Gardener

Birds of paradise are a group of shrubs that really "strut their stuff" in the summer desert landscapes. They include some of the showiest and most unique flowering shrubs grown in the desert southwest or for that matter, in tropical and sub-tropical regions around the world.

Probably the best known of the birds of paradise is the red bird (*Caesalpinia pulcherrima*). It is the brilliant orange flowering shrub that graces the medians and roadways as well as many home landscapes. Flower clusters are globular and more than 6 inches across, fiery orange in color with a tinge of gold on the edges. With their long orange stamen, these flowers are reminiscent of tropical birds, thus the name. Plants also are graced by bright green, feathery compound leaves that provide just the right contrasting background for the showy flowers.

The red bird of paradise is actually a tropical shrub native to the West Indies. In other regions of the world it is known as the "Pride of Barbados". Despite its origins in the Caribbean, red bird thrives in desert conditions and has even naturalized in parts of the Sonoran desert. As you would expect, they require ample water during the warm season. However, Monsoon rains provide much of this needed water. Choose growing location for red birds that are well drained. Low, poorly drained locations cause them to grow slowly and develop iron deficiencies.

Outside the tropics, red bird of paradise is deciduous, losing its leaves when temperatures drop, even here in Havasu. Stems can be killed if the temperature drops below freezing, but plants grow back rapidly from the base in the spring. The common maintenance practice is to cut plants back to 6 inches above the ground after the first cold snap. Even so, plants re-grow rapidly when warm weather returns and they begin flowering by early summer. Without this severe trimming plants can get quite large here. I have seen them be well above the roof line. To keep them more compact and full, trim back as much as desired in January or early February.

Mulching plants is advised. Best is an organic mulch of wood chips or ground cedar or Eucalyptus. A layer of mulch placed on the surface of the soil over roots and around the plant base will

help conserve water and reduce the need for frequent irrigation. Fertilization is normally not recommended, however, a small amount of nitrogen applied as temperatures warm in the spring will speed up growth.

Although not as showy as the red bird, the yellow bird of paradise (*Caesalpinia gilliesii*) is the next most popular of the group. Leaves and flowers are similar, but yellow or desert birds as they are sometimes called, have yellow-petaled flowers with orange stamen. They are extremely drought tolerant and can withstand temperatures down to 10 degrees F., but are also deciduous. Although they will survive on little supplemental irrigation, for landscape purposes they should receive periodic irrigation. Watering will increase flowering and provide a fuller, leafier appearance.

A *Caesalpinia* that, in my opinion, is vastly underutilized is *C. mexicana*, the Mexican poinciana. Unlike *pulcherrima* and *gilliesii*, this one is evergreen with very attractive dark green, compound leaves. Bright yellow, fragrant flower clusters bloom more or less continually from spring to fall. Mexican poinciana develops into a small tree set upon a single trunk. Its ultimate height is about 10 feet over time, making it ideal for planting near entryways and patios. It also makes an attractive container plant. *Mexicana* is cold hardy to 20 degrees F., so should never have a problem here.

All the *Caesalpinias* make great choices for providing summer color in hot, sunny locations. The problem is deciding which to choose? The solution: find a place in your landscape for all three!

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