

For Release: May 26, 2007

Let a Fairy Dust Your Landscape!
By Laura Murphy

There are few plants that can do better or offer more to the Lake Havasu City gardeners than the fairy dusters. They are well adapted for our climate. Not only do they like our heat and soil, they thrive on it. Anything that feels that way about our growing conditions is worth taking a look at. These plants also have sensational flowers, tidy growth characteristics, are drought tolerant and attract hummingbirds!

There are more than 250 species found in the *Calliandra* genus, but only three are native to the southwest and are commonly called fairy dusters. *C. eriophylla* is also called False Mesquite and has light pink to rose colored flowers. *C. californica* known as Baja Fairy Duster, has brilliant scarlet red flowers. The third, *C. penninsularis* known as La Paz Fairy Duster also has red flowers but is not as commonly found. Aside from the flower color, the use and culture of these plants is the same.

The first thing people notice about the fairy dusters are the flowers. They are quite exotic looking. The showy part of the flower is actually the spiky stamens. These form powder puff balls 1-2 inches across. The plants bloom prolifically throughout much of the year. In some locations, they can bloom year round. Hummingbirds find the flowers irresistible. I planted a one gallon red Baja last year and it only took about an hour for it to be discovered by a local hummer. Other birds such as finches, verdins, wrens and gnatcatchers will also feed on it. The flowers are followed by seed pods which are not unattractive. As these dry they will pop open, releasing their seed and eventually fall off the plant. Small birds will eat the seeds and even pry open under-ripe pods to get at them.

The leaves are a deep green and made up of tiny leaflets. The leaves have a delicate feathery look to them that contrasts well with other native plants or in the right setting, can lend a tropical look. It is an evergreen plant but it does thin out in the winter. It can also lose a significant number of leaves if it is seriously drought stressed or if it gets very cold. If the temperature drops below 25 (not likely in Lake Havasu) the branch tips may be damaged.

Fairy Duster *Calliandra californica*_1



As noted before, these plants love our heat. There is no place too hot for them. Plant them in full sun against a west facing wall where nothing else will grow. You will be rewarded with non-stop blooms. They can be planted in partial shade but the blooms will not be as prolific as those that get more sun.

Once established, fairy dusters are very drought tolerant. Owing to their native heritage, very little water is needed to keep them going. Give them a good soak once a week or two in the summer months to keep the plants looking good and keep the blooms coming. They are not fussy about soil type, growing in anything from amended garden soil to rock and gravel. Just make sure the area is well drained. As with most native plants, if you keep their feet wet, they will die.

The plants grow as a loosely branched shrub. The mature size will top out at about four to five feet tall and as wide. The natural growth form is quite attractive and requires little to no pruning to maintain its shape. However, should you wish to prune (for example to keep at a certain size) they will respond well. Pruning can also be used to make the shrubs denser.

Fairy dusters have few pest or disease problems. Protect newly planted stems from rabbits by putting a wire cage around it. When some of the branches get too tall for the rabbits to reach, about 24 to 36 inches, the cage can be removed. Rabbits will graze along the bottom branches but do not do enough damage to worry about.

Landscape uses abound for the fairy dusters. It is an outstanding choice for a specimen plant with its almost non-stop flowering. It is attractive up close and can be planted to accent an entryway or patio. There are no thorns or spines to worry about. Use it as an informal hedge or to add a splash of color against a wall. The size is right to plant under a window with the added bonus of attracting hummingbirds to entertain you.

If you are familiar with the fairy dusters, I am certain you enjoy them. If you are not familiar with them, I urge you to take a serious look at them. They can be found in most

nurseries and garden centers in one gallon and five gallon sizes. Fall or spring is the preferred time to plant them in the ground although they are tough enough they can be planted most anytime in Lake Havasu. They will also grow nicely in large pots. These plants are an outstanding addition to almost any landscape, give one a try!

Laura Murphy is a Lake Havasu City Master Gardener. For more information, contact the Lake Havasu City Master Gardeners by calling their Hot Line at 505-4105 or visit us at Home Garden Day from 11 am to 1 pm the first Tuesday of every month at the Library.

**CONTACT: VICKI COOMBS
ADMINISTRATIVE ASST
THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA
MOHAVE COUNTY
COOPERATIVE EXTENSION
101 E BEALE ST STE A
KINGMAN AZ 86401-5808
928 753-3788/928 753-1665 (FAX)
mohavece@cals.arizona.edu**

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, James A. Christenson, Director, Cooperative Extension, College of Agriculture & Life Sciences, The University of Arizona.

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