

Bird-of-Paradise¹

Robert J. Black²

Description

Bird-of-paradise (*Strelitzia reginae*) is a native of South Africa and one of the most unusual and attractive members of the banana family (*Musaceae*). This popular plant bears a unique flower that resembles a brightly colored bird in flight, giving it the common name, bird-of-paradise. It makes an exceptionally attractive landscape plant in south and central Florida. Bird-of-paradise can be grown in containers in north Florida and moved indoors when freezing temperatures are expected.

In contrast to the banana, the bird-of-paradise is trunkless. The foliage resembles small banana leaves but has long petioles. Leaves are thick, waxy, and glossy green, making it a very attractive ornamental. Leaf blades are 6 inches wide and 18 inches long. The plant usually reaches a height of 4 feet.

The Flower

The inflorescence is borne atop long scapes, or pedicels, that grow to 5 feet or more in height. The flower is the most unusual part. A series of highly colored bracts, or modified leaves, are formed into green, red, and/or purplish canoe-like structures.

Bracts vary between 4 and 8 inches long, depending upon the age and size of the plant.

Each bract contains two or more protruding florets of bright yellow or orange elongated petals and a bright blue tongue. The female part of the flower is the long extension of the blue tongue which is extended well away from the stamens.

Blooming season lasts from September through May. Healthy, mature plants can produce as many as three dozen flower spikes, which will last up to two weeks when cut.

Related Species

Other species of *Strelitzia* are also found in Florida. *Strelitzia alba* (augusta) is a tree form that grows to a height of 18 feet. Its distinct trunk and leaves can grow to 4 feet long and 2 feet wide. Flowers are white and extend from a purplish bract. *Strelitzia nicolai*, known as the giant bird-of-paradise, resembles the much larger traveler's tree (*Ravenala madagascariensis*). The inflorescence has a reddish-brown bract with white flowers and blue tongues. *Strelitzia reginae* var. *juncea* (*Strelitzia parvifolia*; *Strelitzia parvifolia* var. *juncea*) is a smaller plant than *Strelitzia reginae*. Its leaves grow

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to 9 inches long and are less than 3 inches wide. The flowers are bright orange with blue tongues.

Planting and Care

Cultural Information

Bird-of-paradise thrives in most soils, but does best in rich loamy soils with good drainage. The bird-of-paradise is salt tolerant and can be grown near the ocean, but not on the dunes. For good flower production, place plants in sunny or partially shaded locations. Plants grown in partial shade will be taller and have somewhat larger flowers. In full sun, plants are smaller and flowers are on shorter stems.

Bird-of-paradise tends to produce more flowers along the periphery of the plant. Thus, spacing the plants at least 6 feet apart will allow adequate space for flowering.

Planting Information

The planting hole should be dug 2 to 3 times the diameter of the root ball and as deep as the root ball is tall. The planting hole should be dug 2 to 3 times the diameter of the root ball. Make it as deep as the root ball is tall, unless the soil is hard or compacted, in which case, consider digging a planting hole half as deep. Mound the soil to cover the sides of the root ball. A plant installed in this manner might require more frequent irrigation during dry periods but is not likely to suffer from subsurface drainage problems.

When planting, carefully remove the plant from the container. Gently place the plant straight in the hole. Be sure the top of the root ball is no deeper than the existing landscape soil surface. Planting too deeply may cause a delay in flowering. Fill around the ball with soil and gently firm the soil. Water thoroughly while planting to remove air pockets.

Care After Planting

The success or failure of a planting often depends on whether the plants receive adequate moisture. Liberal watering during the growing season will encourage plants to grow more profusely and ensure a large crop of flowers during the blooming season.

To aid in proper watering, construct a saucer-like basin around the plant from the extra backfill soil. This will hold water until it drains down to the plant's roots. Both a soggy soil with poor drainage and insufficient watering will cause leaves to yellow and eventually die. During the winter months, plants should be watered only when the soil next to the plants is fairly dry.

Mulch placed around the base of the plants will help conserve moisture, stabilize root temperature, and reduce weed infestations. Keep a 2- to 3-inch circular area around the stem of plants free of mulch. Mulches against the stems of plants may increase the chance of stem rot.

Common organic mulch materials include leaves, pine needles, bark, wood chips, sawdust and bagasse (a sugar cane by-product). Inorganic materials like glass wool, gravel and crushed stone also are suitable. Peat should not be used because once dry it is very difficult to wet and may restrict water movement into the soil.

Fertilization

For best growth and flowering, bird-of-paradise requires fertilization. Slow-release fertilizers, such as sewage sludge and bloodmeal, or an inorganic complete fertilizer such as 12-4-8, can be used. Apply slow-release fertilizers at a rate of three to five pounds per 100 square feet of bed area and 12-4-8 at the rate of one pound per 100 square feet of bed area. Spread fertilizer around plants every three months during the growing season. Addition of minor elements is recommended.

At least once a year, preferably during summer, remove dead leaves and old flower stalks to prevent fungal organisms from building up on dead tissue.

Cold Hardiness

Although the bird-of-paradise is a tropical plant, it will tolerate temperatures as low as 24°F for a short time. However, temperatures at freezing or below may damage developing flower buds and flowers. The bird-of-paradise can be grown in north Florida landscapes with protection, but there is always a chance of losing a season of blooms during

a severe winter. You can ensure blooms every year in north Florida by growing plants in containers and moving them indoors when freezing temperatures are expected.

Propagation

Seeds

Obtaining a mature flowering bird-of-paradise plant from seed requires three to five years. The black seeds have orange fuzz on one end and are the size of sweet pea seeds. Because they have hard seed coats, seeds must be scarified (nicked or scratched) before they will germinate. To scarify, soak in lukewarm water for several hours, and then nick with a knife or small file.

Sow seeds in vermiculite, a one-to-one volume mix of peat and perlite, or a ready-made mix, to a depth of one-half inch. The soil mix should be kept damp and not allowed to dry out. To create a humid environment, cover the seed container with a sheet of glass or clear plastic until germination. Seeds germinate in about two to three months. To speed germination time, wrap unscarified seeds in a plastic bag and place them in a refrigerator at 40-45°F for two weeks. Scarify seeds and plant as described.

Transplant seedlings individually into pots when they have two true leaves. Fertilization can begin at this stage.

Division

The bird-of-paradise can also be propagated by division. This method requires only one to two years before the plants reach maturity and flower. For best results, divide clumps during late spring or early summer. Dig up and separate old clumps, dividing those with four to five shoots into single-stem divisions. Remove dead leaves and roots and wash the roots. To prevent disease and insect carryover, soak divisions in a 1:10 dilution of bleach for ten minutes before planting.

Plant divisions at the same soil depth at which they were previously grown. Keep the soil moist until roots are established, then begin fertilizing. Divisions usually require at least three months to generate new roots.

Pest and Disease Problems

The bird-of-paradise is relatively pest free. Occasionally, you may need to spray plants for aphids or caterpillars, which damage foliage. A leaf borer similar to a corn borer will sometimes attack bracts during August and September, but can be controlled by weekly sprays. Scale insects and snails occasionally may pose a problem. Fungal leafspots may appear when plants are watered in the evening. Information and recommendations for insect and disease control are available from your local county extension office.