

# BIRD OF PARADISE SHRUBBERIES FOR THE LOW DESERT



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The bird of paradise is one of the most popular non-native well-adapted shrubs that are suitable for the low desert of Arizona. There are three species in the family *Fabaceae* and genus *Caesalpinia* (formerly called *Poinciana*) that often go by the common name of bird of paradise and each of them have additional descriptive modifiers on the common name: yellow, Mexican, and red. While they all have similarities, they also have differences and understanding them allows the gardener to make an informed decision about putting the right plant in the right place. None of these three plants should be confused with the bird of paradise plant grown commonly in southern California and Florida

gardens, which is in a different botanical group (*Strelitzia* genus) and is not easily grown in desert gardens because it requires a cool moist climate. In addition, there are three more shrubs in the *Caesalpinia* genus that could be considered in a low desert situation. They are cascalote (*Caesalpinia cacalaco*), palo Colorado (*Caesalpinia platyloba*), and copper *Caesalpinia* (*Caesalpinia pumila*).

The table below compares differences between the three bird of paradise species and is followed with general information applicable to all three species.

## Caesalpinia species comparison:

	<i>C. gilliesii</i> (Figure 1) Yellow Bird of Paradise	<i>C. mexicana</i> (Figure 2) Mexican Bird of Paradise	<i>C. pulcherrima</i> (Figure 3) Red Bird of Paradise
Landscape Use	Informal shrub that should be allowed to grow to its natural form; native to Argentina and Uruguay but has escaped cultivation in Arizona and naturalized in washes	Background shrub or can be trained to small tree; native to Mexico and cultivated in Arizona, occasionally escapes cultivation	Background or specimen shrub; origin unknown due to widespread cultivation; widely distributed and naturalized in tropical areas of America
Size	5 to 10 feet with spread of 4 to 6 feet; grows rapidly	10 to 15 feet with spread of 10 feet; grows rapidly if regularly irrigated	4 to 10 feet with spread of 4 to 6 feet; grows rapidly; mature size determined by irrigation and severity of winters
Water Needs	Drought-tolerant but will look best if watered every month	Every month once established; water every week during spring and summer for continuous blooms	Every month once established; water every week during spring and summer for continuous blooms
Hardiness	Hardy to 10-15° F	Hardy to 18° F	Damaged at 32° F
Exposure	Full or reflected sun	Full sun or light shade	Full sun or light shade; avoid northern exposures
Flowers	Yellow with long red stamens, mid-spring through late summer	Solid yellow; may flower year-round in warm-winter areas, spring through fall elsewhere	Red and orange, also solid red and solid yellow cultivars, blooms through the warm months
Leaves	Bipinnate, 10-15 cm long, bearing 3-10 pairs of pinnae, each with 6-10 pairs of leaflets 5-6 mm long and 2-4 mm broad	Bipinnate, 4-9 cm long, bearing 5-9 pairs of pinnae each with 4-5 pairs of leaflets that are 1-2.5 cm long and 0.7-1.3 cm broad	Bipinnate, 20-40 cm long, bearing 3-10 pairs of pinnae, each with 6-10 pairs of leaflets 15-25 mm long and 10-15 mm broad



Figure 1. Yellow Bird of Paradise (*Caesalpinia gilliesii*)

Figure 2. Mexican Bird of Paradise (*Caesalpinia mexicana*)



Figure 3. Red Bird of Paradise (*Caesalpinia pulcherrima*)

▶▶▶ ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF PETER L. WARREN.



## ▶▶▶ SOIL

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All three species are tolerant of any soil type as long as there is good drainage.

## ▶▶▶ MAINTENANCE

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When grown as a shrub, pruning is necessary only to remove frost-damaged limbs or to remove dead, crossing, or damaged branches. More pruning will be needed if the Mexican Bird of Paradise is to be developed and maintained as a small tree.

Once blooming is finished, the flower stalks on all three species may be removed to prevent seed pods from forming and to reduce the likelihood of volunteer seedlings. If the pods are left on the plant to dry and split, the seeds can be thrown a surprising distance. Cleanup of the split pods and any volunteer seedlings will be needed for a tidy landscape.

The Red Bird of Paradise dies back to ground at temperatures below freezing. It generally regrows in spring from the ground and can be pruned to a few inches above the ground in late winter. Mulching the base of plant in colder areas may protect the plant's crown until spring.

## ▶▶▶ PROPAGATION

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If you want to save the seeds for producing new plants, it is best to remove the flower stalks when the seed pods first turn brown and put them into paper bags to fully dry. The seeds have a hard coating that needs to be penetrated to ensure germination. The horticultural term for breaking through the seed coat is scarification, which can be done by scraping and nicking the seed with sandpaper or a wood file until a color change is seen. The scarification should be done on the seed's surface and not on the edge to prevent damage to the embryo.

## ▶▶▶ CAUTION

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The ripe seeds of all three species are poisonous.

## ▶▶▶ REFERENCES

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