

The Weekly Plant

19 June 2016

Names: These plants are usually referred to as “bird of paradise”¹ with various modifiers such as shrub, bush, red, yellow, Mexican, desert. Each of these names is applied to several plants. Thus, determining absolutely which plant is meant is almost impossible without use of the scientific name. Convention used in this article:

Red bird - *Caesalpinia pulcherrima*² (flowers red-orange-yellow, all-yellow selections available)

Mexican bird - *Caesalpinia mexicana*² (flowers all yellow)

Yellow bird - *Caesalpinia gilliesii*² (flowers with yellow petals and long red stamen)

Discussion

When these plants are in flower, you can’t walk by without noticing them. They all have large, showy flowers and are often in bloom in early summer when other plants are resting in the heat.

These three plants are not native to Arizona or the US. All have naturalized outside their natural range, especially in parts of Mexico and along the US gulf coast. None of these shrubs are completely cold hardy in our area. Red bird dies to the ground every winter. Yellow and Mexican bird are both small evergreen trees in warmer climates. Here they remain shrubs that usually drop their leaves every winter.

The genus *Caesalpinia* is in the Fabaceae or pea family and has the typical long, flat pods of that family. There are lots of similarities between species in this genus: bipinnate, alternate leaves; flowers with long, showy stamen (exceptionally long in yellow bird); brittle wood; toxic seeds and perhaps other plant parts; pods that pop open explosively and audibly, propelling seeds far and wide; inability to fix nitrogen (hence the recommendations for fertilization below).

All birds of paradise are used extensively in landscaping in the Tucson area, especially red bird. Here’s how to tell which is which, plus some pros and cons.

Red bird: distinguishing characteristics: many prickly spines on lower stems; leaves 8-12” long and 5” wide. This shrub blooms from about May until knocked back by cold, then dies to the ground (see photo). Cut to 6-12” in late winter/early spring, expect regrowth to 5+feet by end of summer. This plant reseeds in irrigated landscapes. Make sure to remove seedlings you don’t want when they are small.

Yellow bird: distinguishing characteristics: bright red stamens up to 5-6” in length, flowers sticky to the touch. This shrub stays small in our area and loses its leaves every winter. Wood is very brittle and the plant recovers slowly, so prune lightly only if absolutely needed. Fertilize to encourage denser foliage. Flowers start about April.

Mexican bird: distinguishing characteristics: all-yellow flowers with short stamen, no spines on stems, fruit a linear, flat pod; flowers as early as March. This shrub stays small in our area and may be evergreen in warm winters. Wood is brittle. Fertilize to encourage denser foliage.

¹ These are not the birds of paradise frequently grown in Southern California. Those are *Strelitzia reginae*. Click [here](#) for info.

² Tropicos is source of accepted scientific name.

Yellow bird: yellow flowers with distinctive red stamen. Leaves more “ferny” than those of Mexican bird.



Photos and text by
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Red bird: shown in photo at top of page.
Above: form in winter, flower, spines on stem.



Mexican bird: flowers and form. Flattened pod is similar in all 3 species.