

Bird-of-Paradise

Bird-of-paradise (*Strelitzia reginae*) gets its name from its unique flower, which resembles the head of a brightly colored tropical bird. It is also called the crane flower. This slow growing, evergreen perennial is native to the subtropical coasts of southern Africa and is widely grown in warm regions.



The bird-of-paradise develops slowly by division of its underground stem and has a trunkless, clump-forming pattern of growth. A mature clump stands 4–5 feet high and spans 3–5 feet in width. The thick, stiff leaves are about 6 inches wide and 18 inches long and arise from the base of the clump in a fan-like pattern. They are grayish green, smooth, and waxy, resembling small banana leaves on longer petioles.

The flower is borne on a long stalk (up to 5 ft or more), and the colorful “bird’s head” with its pointed “beak” peeks out from the foliage. As the flower blooms, it fans out to resemble an orange and blue crown on the head of the bird. Each stalk holds one to three flowers, each with three orange sepals and three blue petals enclosing the stamen and style.

Several other *Strelitzia* species are found in Hawaii. *Strelitzia nicolai*, known as the giant bird-of-paradise, resembles the traveler’s palm (*Ravenala madagascariensis*) but is smaller in size and span. It is a tree form that can reach a height of 15 ft or more. Its leaves are arranged in a fan pattern, and the leaf scars give the trunk a rough texture. The flowers are white with blue tongues and are sometimes difficult to view because they are so high in the plant.

Another close relative is *S. reginea* var. *juncea*, which produces a smaller flower and has leaf blades that do not develop, giving its leaves an unusual, sword-like appearance. This variety is gaining popularity in Hawaii.

Planting, care, maintenance

Bird-of-paradise produces the most flowers when grown in full sun, although the leaves are darker green when it is grown in light shade. It is salt tolerant and will grow in most soils, but it thrives in rich soils with good drainage. The plant tends to produce more flowers along the periphery of the

clump, and plant spacing of 6 ft or more apart is needed for good flowering. Bird-of-paradise flowers throughout the year at lower elevations in Hawaii, but it is more prolific in late spring and summer. Liberal watering during the winter will encourage it to grow more profusely and ensure good flower production during the summer months. Dead flowers and leaves remain on the plant indefinitely and should be pruned periodically.

Mulching around the plants with a 3–4 inch layer of well composted organic mulch conserves moisture, reduces weed infestation, and provides micronutrients. For best growth and flowering, apply a slow-release, complete fertilizer at a rate of 1 lb every three months to a full-grown clump.



The variety juncea



Giant bird-of-paradise

Healthy, mature plants can produce as many as three dozen flower spikes at one time. When cut, the flowers last up to two weeks. To prolong vase life, change the water every two days and trim an inch off the bottom of the stem with a sharp knife at each change. A “trick of the trade” is to cut the stem while it is submerged—this aids water uptake.

Propagation

Bird-of-paradise is propagated either by seed or division. Seedlings take 3–5 years to produce flowers, while plants grown from divisions will flower in 1–2 years.

If the flowers are allowed to develop after being hand pollinated, seed pods containing 60–80 seeds per pod will mature in about five months. The seeds are black with orange tufts. Sow the seeds before the seed coat becomes hard. If the seeds are stored and become hard and dry, scratch the seed coat with a file before sowing. (Commercial nurseries scarify hardened seeds by soaking them in concentrated sulfuric acid for 5 minutes, followed by rinsing in fresh water.) Sow the seeds in a loose, clean, organic-type medium. They will germinate in 2–3 months if kept moist. Seedlings can be transplanted into pots when they have three or four leaves. They should be given fertilizer and kept in partial shade for 6 months before transplanting.

Propagation by division is done either by separating the clumps or removing young offshoots of the plant. The success rate of this method is lower than for seed. Divide clumps during late spring or early summer. Separate old clumps into single-stem divisions containing four to five young shoots.

The soil level around replanted divisions or transplanted seedlings should be the same as that at which they were previously grown—do not bury the stem any deeper. Keep the soil moist until roots are established and then begin applying fertilizer. Divisions usually require at least three months to generate new roots.



A mature, flowering bird-of-paradise

Pests and diseases

The bird-of-paradise is relatively pest free. Insect pests that occasionally attack it include scales, mealybugs, whiteflies, and aphids. These can be controlled with systemic insecticides.*

Diseases affecting bird-of-paradise include bacterial wilt and root rot. Root rot is a seed-borne fungus that can be controlled by soaking the seeds in water for one day at room temperature followed by a 30-minute dip in water heated to 135°F. After cooling and drying, plant the seeds in clean potting soil.

Information and recommendations for insect and disease control are available from your local Cooperative Extension Service office.

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Photos courtesy of Richard A. Criley, Department of Horticulture

*Read the pesticide label to be sure that it can be used on ornamentals, and follow all label directions.