

Caesalpinia



There are two very common species of *Caesalpinia* in the nursery trade: *pulcherrima* and *gillesii*, and both are quite beautiful. *Caesalpinia pulcherrima* is most commonly known as Pride of Barbados or red bird of paradise. It has orange-yellow flowers and is a little bushier than *Caesalpinia gillesii*, which is most commonly known as yellow bird of paradise, because it has all yellow flowers. Both plants love the heat, need full sun, and prefer very well-drained soil. These plants will bloom all summer long with very little supplemental irrigation, so be careful not to overwater them. Both plants may freeze to the ground in winter, but not always. If you notice leaves reemerging on the plant in the spring, the plant was not damaged by the cold and may be left alone. But as temperatures warm up, if you notice growth at the base of the plant, from the roots, and not from the branches, go ahead and prune off all the top growth and allow the plant to reemerge from the roots. Pride of Barbados, the orange flowered one, is more frost tender, and does freeze to the ground in our winters more often than not. Both plants can get up to about 8 feet tall, but Pride of Barbados is generally a little shorter and bushier, mostly due to the fact that it freezes to the ground most years. And both plants get about 4 to 6 feet wide, so give them plenty of room. Both plants attract hummingbirds and butterflies and are considered to be deer resistant.

Common: There are many common names for this plant. They are in no particular order - bird of paradise shrub, bird of paradise bush, desert bird of paradise. Sometimes people get *C. gillesii* confused with *C. mexicana* and call it yellow bird of paradise (even though the flowers have bright red stamens). This is problematic and demonstrates why the use of scientific names rather than common names to identify plants is important.

Origin: Native to Argentina and Uruguay, but has now naturalized in portions of the Chihuahuan and Sonoran Deserts in close proximity to inhabited areas.

Hardiness zones USDA 9 - 11

Landscape Use: Seasonal accent, quick background though canopy is too sparse to make a screen, [nice tropical shrub for transition areas](#) in oasis landscape design themes.

Foliage/texture: Leaves twice pinnately compound, leaflets to 1/4 inch and less, light green, graying with age, stems without spines but with well-defined lenticels; fine texture.

Flowers & fruits: [Yellow flowers with red filaments on terminal spikes](#), fruit are green pods in terminal clusters turning to brown pods in summer that are heavy and weigh down branches.

Seasonal color: Festive yellow/red flower color in spring and fall

Temperature: Heat loving like *C. pulcherrima*. In Phoenix, the 'desert bird' is partially to fully deciduous during the coldest winters.

Light: Full sun

Soil: Tolerant. Regular fertilization will increase foliar canopy density which is otherwise typically sparse to open.

Watering: Needs summer water

Pruning: Head back lightly after bloom only as needed to promote a more excellent shape. Unlike *C. pulcherrima*, don't severely prune the 'desert bird' as it is slower to recover. Because the stem wood of this shrub is **SO** brittle, one can easily prune this shrub with [bare hands](#)!

Propagation: Seed

Disease and pests: White flies

Additional comments: The desert bird of paradise is a good, medium, open-canopied accent plant. It evokes semi-arid, subtropical connotations and attracts hummingbirds. The tanins found in the seeds of many *Caesalpinia* taxa [are mildly toxic](#) and if ingested might cause temporary gastrointestinal distress that usually subsides after 24 hours.