

Plant of the Week: Firebush



PHOTO BY William M. Johnson

Firebush is a tropical shrub that reliably produces clusters of bright reddish-orange or scarlet tubular flowers in abundance from early summer until late fall. Firebush is so attractive to hummingbirds that some gardeners also call it the hummingbird bush.

Plants do not always live up to the expectations of performance that their common names would suggest. Firebush is a notable exception as its name says it all! This tropical shrub reliably produces clusters of bright reddish-orange or scarlet tubular flowers in abundance from early summer until late fall. Even the flower stems are red. Firebush seems to actually flour-

ish under Gulf Coast weather during August and September. I gave it a "Two Thumbs Up" rating in 2011 for its stellar performance under record heat and drought conditions.

Firebush is heat, drought and salt tolerant. Like many landscape plants, firebush is also known by other common names including Mexican firebush and scarlet bush.

As I took the photo of

one of my firebush plants in my home landscape that accompany this article, I was focused on the flowers. Then I heard the familiar and distinctive high-pitched, buzzing sound of a hummingbird rising up over the firebush. He was only about a yard away from me and I remained motionless to enjoy this rare close up encounter. Firebush is so attrac-



September 18, 2013



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News column printed in the Galveston Daily News, The Post, and other Galveston County Newspapers.



tive to hummingbirds that some gardeners also call it the hummingbird bush. Butterflies love it also.

Firebush is a dependable and useful perennial for Galveston County landscapes as well as the southern half of Texas. However, it freezes back to the ground during cold winters but dependably re-sprouts each spring in our growing area.

Firebush is native to tropical regions, including parts of Mexico where it grows as a large shrub or small tree. It will dependently grow to a height of 8 feet or more by late summer in our growing zone. It is best utilized in mass plantings and borders. It also does well in containers where it can be placed on a patio in summer and brought inside to a sunny location during the winter.

Full sun or part sun locations are preferable to shady ones which will result in rank growth and lower flower production. As an added bonus, as temperatures cool in the fall, firebush foliage turns to a burning red.

There will be a wide selection of firebush plants offered at the Master Gardeners' Ornamental and Perennial Plant Sale on Saturday, October 12, from 9:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. in Carbide Park.

Caterpillars on Citrus

Orange dog caterpillars are commonly found feeding on citrus trees during midsummer. The distinctive caterpil-

lars look like bird-droppings—an ingenious disguise for protection from predators. If your tree has only a few caterpillars, you can handpick them off.

Larger infestations can be treated with 2 to 3 applications of an insecticide containing *Bacillus thuringiensis* (such as Dipel or Green Light's BT Worm Killer). Applications should be spaced four or five days apart because this product does not last long in the environment and quickly breaks down. *Bacillus thuringiensis* is derived from a naturally occurring bacterium that only affects caterpillars and does not affect people, pets, wildlife and many beneficial insects. Malathion and Sevin also provide good control.

Be aware that the orange dog caterpillar is the larval stage of a beautiful swallowtail butterfly. Killing the caterpillars will stop emergence of adult butterflies. Orange dog caterpillars will not likely kill a citrus tree but caterpillars chewing on a young tree can be harmful. So you have to decide if losing a few citrus leaves is a small price to pay for being able to enjoy some swallowtail butterflies.

At a glance

WHAT: Fall T-budding of Citrus & Deciduous Fruit Trees

DATE: Saturday, September 21

TIME: 9:00 a.m. - 12 Noon

TOPICS: T-budding is a grafting method is used on trees about

the size of a pencil. A PowerPoint presentation by Master Gardener Herman Auer along with hands-on demonstrations will be offered to help build confidence for the attendee. Class is limited to 24 participants; others are welcome to observe.

WHAT: The Fabulous Fragrant Frangipani (Plumeria)

DATE: Tuesday, September 24

TIME: 6:30 - 8:00 p.m.

TOPICS: Master Gardener Loretta Osteen will provide a PowerPoint program covering the history and culture of Plumeria, how to use the flowers, propagation by seeds and cuttings, and grafting. Options for protecting plumeria over the winter season will also be stressed.

Both seminars will be offered at the Galveston County AgriLife Extension Office in Carbide Park (4102-B, Main St. La Marque). Pre-registration required by phone (218-534-3413, ext. 1-2) or e-mail (GALV3@wt.net) or website (<http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/galveston>).