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Florida-Friendly Landscaping™ PROGRAM

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Erythrostemon mexicanus: Mexican Bird of Paradise, Mexican Caesalpinia[1]

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This Florida-Friendly Landscaping™ publication is part of a series originally written by Edward F. Gilman. Visit https://ffl.ifas.ufl.edu/ *to learn more about creating and maintaining attractive landscapes that protect Florida's water resources and environment.*

Introduction

Mexican bird of paradise is an evergreen large shrub to small tree that is native to southernmost parts of Texas and central Mexico. This plant naturally occurs in scrub and dry topical forests of its native range. This plant has a rounded growth habit and reaches a minimum height of 15 feet and spread of 10 feet (Figure 1). Fine textured foliage and bright yellow flowers borne on the new growth combine to make this a wonderful small tree or large shrub for any garden or landscape (Figure 2). Flowers are borne in terminal clusters and cover the canopy for several months from spring through fall (Figure 3). The flowers and evergreen bipinnately compound foliage contrast with the small, inconspicuous thorns present along the stems. The pods are slightly curled, and seeds germinate only locally in the landscape, but do not appear to spread to other landscapes (Figure 4). This plant is well suited for use as a specimen, in a container, or for parking lot islands in commercial landscapes.



Figure 1. Full form, flowering—*Erythrostemon mexicanus*: Mexican bird of paradise.
Credit: © Carlos G Velazco-Macias, some rights reserved (CC BY-NC) via iNaturalist



Figure 2. Leaf—*Erythrostemon mexicanus*: Mexican bird of paradise.
Credit: © E. A. Mayer, some rights reserved (CC BY-NC) via iNaturalist



Figure 3. Flower—*Erythrostemon mexicanus*: Mexican bird of paradise.
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Figure 4. Fruit—*Erythrostemon mexicanus*: Mexican bird of paradise.
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General Information

Scientific name: *Erythrostemon mexicanus*

Previous scientific name(s): *Caesalpinia mexicana*

Pronunciation: E-rith-throw-stem-on mec-si-can-us

Common name(s): Mexican bird of paradise, Mexican caesalpinia, Mexican holdback

Family: *Fabaceae*

Plant type: shrub; tree

USDA hardiness zones: 9A through 11B (Figures 5 and 6)

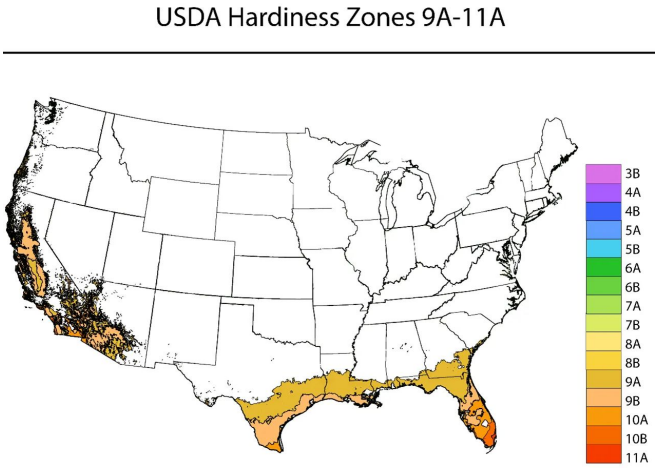


Figure 5. Shaded area represents potential planting zone—USDA Hardiness Zones 9A–11A; 11B within planting zone but not picutred on map.
Credit: This map is based on the 2023 USDA Plant Hardiness Zone Map. Visit https://planthardiness.ars.usda.gov/ for specific zone information.

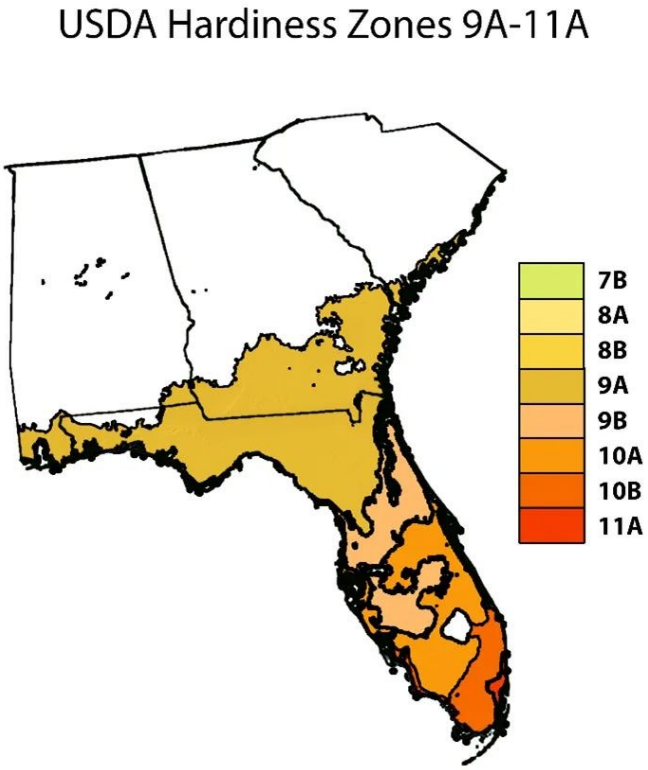


Figure 6. Shaded area represents potential planting zone in the SE Region—USDA Hardiness Zones 9A–11A; 11B within planting zone but not pictured on map.
Credit: This map is based on the 2023 USDA Plant Hardiness Zone Map. Visit https://planthardiness.ars.usda.gov/ for specific zone information.

Planting month for zone 9: year-round

Planting month for zones 10 and 11: year-round

Origin: native to North America (Texas)

Invasive potential: not known to be invasive

Uses: specimen; near a deck or patio; container or above ground planter; small parking lot islands (< 100 square feet in size); medium-sized parking lot islands (100–200 square feet in size); large parking lot islands (> 200 square feet in size)

Availability: somewhat available, may have to go out of the region to find the plant

Description

Height: 15 to 25 feet

Spread: 12 to 18 feet

Plant habit: round

Plant density: moderate

Growth rate: moderate

Texture: fine

Foliage

Leaf arrangement: opposite/subopposite

Leaf type: bipinnately compound

Leaf margin: entire

Leaf shape: elliptic (oval)

Leaf venation: pinnate

Leaf type and persistence: evergreen

Leaf blade length: less than 2 inches

Leaf color: green

Fall color: no fall color change

Fall characteristic: not showy

Flower

Flower color: yellow

Flower characteristic: spring flowering; summer flowering; fall flowering; showy

Fruit

Fruit shape: pod or pod-like

Fruit length: 3 to 6 inches

Fruit cover: dry or hard

Fruit color: brown

Fruit characteristic: inconspicuous and not showy

Trunk and Branches

Trunk/bark/branches: can be trained to grow with a short, single trunk; not particularly showy; inconspicuous thorns

Current year stem/twig color: brown

Current year stem/twig thickness: medium

Culture

Light requirement: plant grows in partial shade; plant grows in full sun

Soil tolerances: acidic; slightly alkaline; well-drained; sand

Drought tolerance: high

Soil salt tolerances: moderate

Plant spacing: plant on 10- to 15-foot centers

Other

Roots: usually not a problem

Winter interest: evergreen foliage

Pest resistance: long-term health usually not affected by pests

Toxicity: this plant displays toxic characteristics; seed pods and seeds are toxic if ingested; seedpods cause gastrointestinal distress if ingested

Use and Management

Mexican bird of paradise produces the most blooms in full sun but may also be located in partial shade. This plant is native to desert, scrub habitats, and is highly drought and heat tolerant, and also tolerates moderate levels of salt. It is a hardy and a fairly low-maintenance plant. This plant prefers well-drained soil and has a fast growth rate. It may produce some litter in the landscape including seed pods and fallen flowers and leaflets. The seed pods of this plant are toxic.

This plant makes a good addition near a patio or deck, or in a shrub border to add color and texture. Train the plant into a small tree by removing lower foliage and branches or let the rounded form develop with branches drooping to the ground if there is enough room for it to spread. The outstanding flower display and small size makes it well suited for planting in a container, even in a hot, dry location. The flowers of this plant attract hummingbirds and other pollinators. This is a host plant for the curve-winged metalmark butterfly (*Emesis emesia*), which is present in its native range. Good drought tolerance makes it well adapted for planting in parking lot buffer strips and in other tough sites.

Design Considerations

Mexican bird of paradise brings a bold tropical splash to Florida landscapes and thrives in hot, dry sites where many plants fail. With its open, airy form, use it as a specimen or focal accent in a sunny bed, to anchor a house corner, or near a patio; with light pruning, it can be trained into a graceful multi-trunked small tree that casts dappled shade.

When selecting companion plants, focus on creating contrast in texture and color while sharing the same need for full sun and well-drained soil. Silver or blue foliage such as silver saw palmetto (*Serenoa repens* 'Cinerea') or blue agave (*Agave tequilana*) makes the yellow-orange blooms pop, while muhlygrass (*Muhlenbergia capillaris*) adds a soft, billowing layer and a pink fall haze. For wildlife, combine with firebush (*Hamelia patens*) to draw hummingbirds, and use beach sunflower (*Helianthus debilis*) as a sprawling yellow groundcover.

Pest and Diseases

Leaf chewing insects occasionally eat some foliage. The plant has not been widely grown, so its pest and disease problems are not well known.

[1] This document is FPS82, one of a series of the Department of Environmental Horticulture, UF/IFAS Extension. Original publication date October 1999. Revised July 2022 and February 2026. Visit the Ask IFAS website at https://ask.ifas.ufl.edu/ for the currently supported version of this publication. *To learn more about creating and maintaining attractive landscapes that protect Florida's water and natural resources, visit ffl.ifas.ufl.edu/*.

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