

Bird of Paradise

By Saei Ann Richerson

Hailing from South Africa, the *Strelitzia* is cultivated world-wide. The most common, *Strelitzia Reginae*, is a rapid grower that reaches four feet high and spreads in clumps. The *Strelitzia Nicotai*, commonly called the "White Bird of Paradise," can grow up to fifteen feet high. Its leaves can easily be mistaken for those of a Banana. Another plant frequently called the Bird Of Paradise is the *Caesalpinia Pulcherrima*, although it is not related to the *Strelitzia* family.

The blooms commonly resemble a large, brightly colored tropical bird hence the name Bird Of Paradise. The name "Strelitzia" honors England's Queen Charlotte Sophia, Duchess of Mecklenburg-Strelitz who was the consort of King George III who was a patron of botany. You can find *Strelitzias* in many colors including white, orange, red, pink and yellow.

These plants prefer full sun in the winter and soil that is on the dry side. Once summer arrives they should be given a bit of shade during the hottest part of the day. They prefer soil that is deep, loamy, well drained and fertile. The soil should not lack for moisture, but it should not be wet.

In the spring when new growth appears, you should increase the water along with giving your plant some fertilizer. A good fertilizer to use would be one teaspoon of ammonium sulphate per gallon of water every time you water. If you prefer to purchase a standard fertilizer look for one that has an analysis rating of 20/10/20. The last number can be higher, but preferably not lower.

The blooms of the Bird Of Paradise are actually a succession of blooms that open together instead of one large flower as many people think.

Waiting on your Bird Of Paradise to bloom could take some patience. This plant is not for everyone, and would definitely be considered a novelty. The Bird Of Paradise

will only bloom when mature and must be root bound in its pot. This could take two years or longer assuming that the exact needs of the plant are met. You can expect your bird to bloom anywhere from September through April.

Although it is possible to grow a Bird Of Paradise in a house, it prefers a greenhouse or sun room that receives at least four hours or more of direct sunlight. Nighttime temperatures should not fall below 50 to 55 degrees during the winter months.



Once your Bird Of Paradise blooms, you may want to collect seeds from it. In nature, Birds Of Paradise are pollinated by birds, however, you may choose to hand pollinate your plant.

After the blooms on your plant have faded, be sure to cut the stem down as far as you can. They should bloom on a yearly basis once they start to bloom providing they receive the proper care.

Propagation of this plant is done by dividing the old specimen. The old dead leaves should be removed. It is also necessary to thin the plant from time to time by division.

A great place to grow your Bird Of Paradise in the summer months would be by a pool or pond. The plant not only gives the area an exotic look, but it seems to benefit from growing under those conditions, and the leaves don't show signs of water spotting.

The Bird Of Paradise is commonly attacked by scale. A good way to treat this problem is with ultra-fine horticultural oil. This oil has recently been approved to be sold to home gardeners. If you cannot find this oil in your area, you can remove the scale by hand. However, you must keep an eye on your plant because you may not see them all at once. The horticultural oil contains a growth regulator that keeps the scale from maturing.

Should your Bird Of Paradise get frosted on, it will be very slow to recover. If the frost is light, then you will have a good chance of your plant surviving.

The Bird Of Paradise is quickly becoming a common plant to find. Look in your favorite tropical plant section at your local nursery and you will probably find one. The white ones seem more easily accessible than the orange, but seeds are available. The seeds are very slow to germinate and should be soaked and pricked prior to planting if you intend to have any success with them. I have been waiting for almost a year now for my Bird Of Paradise seeds to germinate without any luck thus far, but I haven't given up.

I personally feel that the Strelitzia family has quite a showy flower that is well worth waiting for. Each person has individual tastes and patience with a plant, but it is one I would recommend checking into.

