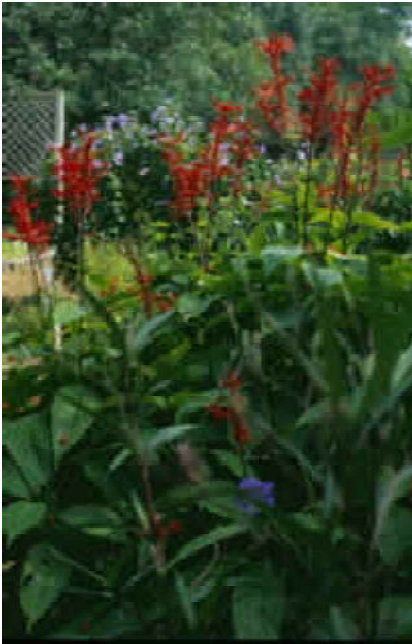


Firespike Sets the Fall Garden Ablaze
Marie Harrison
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Firespike, (Odontonema Strictum) Photo provided by David Marshall, UFL/IFAS, Leon County Extension Office.

All summer long the firespike has been growing and putting on its large avocado like leaves.

Soon, in early fall, it will adorn itself with 1-inch tubular, bright red flowers that almost smother 12-inch spikes. The tips of some of the spikes flatten out and look almost like the old cocks' combs (*Celosia cristata*) that I remember from childhood. Some people think that it resembles salvia.

We humans are not the only ones to notice the showy blossoms. Butterflies and hummingbirds zoom in for their share of the nectar.

Firespike (*Odontonema strictum*) is native to Central America. An attractive, compact shrub, it will reach 4 feet in the garden and about 3 feet in containers. Shiny, bright green, oblong leaves grow to about 8 inches long and 4 inches wide. Even when not in bloom it adds a tropical feel to the garden.

Firespike is one of those low-maintenance perennials that gardeners always search out. All year I have done nothing to it except sprinkle a little Osmocote (a slow-release fertilizer that is encapsulated in a polymer coating that allows nutrients to be released over a long period of time) around the base in early spring just as the new growth started emerging. If I had not had the Osmocote, I would have fertilized it every month to six weeks during the growing season with a complete slow-release fertilizer such as 10-10-10.

Of course, it is planted in a well-mulched area of the landscape, so weeds are not a problem. In my garden no treatment for any pests has been necessary, and according to researchers at the University of Florida, there are no pests of any consequence.

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Although the foliage gets killed each winter, firespike is reliably root hardy throughout Florida and most of the deep South. Internet discussion groups indicate that gardeners grow it in Shreveport, LA, and Mississippi gardeners report that it is hardy throughout the state. When freezing weather arrives, firespike will turn black and its show will be over. At that time the blackened stems can be cut back to the ground. To protect the roots during the winter, scatter a bit of mulch over the crown.

Firespike seems to prefer a site with moderate shade, but it can be grown in full sun as long as it gets adequate moisture. It prefers rich, moist, well-drained soil, but like many of our plants, it can do with less if it has to. Moderately fertile, sandy soil is adequate.

Firespike spreads slowly, but eventually it forms a clump two or three feet wide. While it is tolerant of a wide range of soils from acidic to slightly alkaline, it shows very little tolerance for salt near the coast. Propagation is easy from cuttings, seeds, or division of older clumps.

Use this adaptable perennial in the landscape in several ways. Cluster several firespikes 3 to 4 feet apart as a backdrop or border for gardens, patios and walkways. Remember that the tops will not be present after the first frost, so site them near some hardy shrubs to avoid gaping holes in the winter landscape. Floral designers make good use of the colorful spikes in floral designs, and anyone can cut a few stems and put them in a vase of water to be enjoyed in the home.

Firespike can be planted at any time of the year in Florida. It is available in independent nurseries that specialize in plants for local conditions. When you find it, buy three, five, or seven, and plant them two feet apart to fill in the area quickly. Massed in this way, they make a bold statement in the landscape.

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