

Bottlebrush Shrub is a Magnet for Hummingbirds



Photograph to be credited to Mississippi State University Extension: Suitable to our area, bottlebrush is a shrub or small tree with unusual flowers which are attractive to hummingbirds.

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On days when I'm in my office, I enjoy seeing a ruby-throated hummingbird that frequently makes visits near my window. The object of interest is a blooming bottlebrush shrub. The little bird seems to favor visiting this plant over a hummingbird feeder that is nearby.

Bottlebrush is a beautiful shrub or small tree, exhibiting bright flower color from late spring through fall. The unique flower form is also sure to attract attention. The bloom is four to six inches long and about two inches wide. The flower spikes are made up of many individual small flowers providing a distinctive "bottle brush" shape.

Bottlebrushes belong in the genus *Callistemon*, and there are 34 different species, as well as several cultivars. There are both dwarf and larger growing forms, and colors range from white to red.

Crimson Bottlebrush, or *Callistemon citrinus*, is the most widely known species and the one that is most often found in Gulf Coast gardens. This was a very popular landscape plant many years ago in the Deep South . Several very hard freezes evidently reduced the numbers and it has not made a strong comeback.

The subject of possible cold injury to this plant leads to another thought. As gardeners we sometimes limit our landscape's potential by choosing only the most cold hardy shrubs, vines, and flowers. Many of the subtropical species make it through most winters, while some are killed to the ground and quickly recover the following spring. The added color and resistance to high summer temperatures and humidity provided by tropics and subtropics more than compensates for the few that might be frozen during a hard winter.

Bottlebrush is technically a subtropical plant, best adapted to the USDA Hardiness Zone 9 through 11. Since

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the northern Gulf Coast is in Zone 8b, there is a chance of varying degrees of winter damage. But, this plant is worth the slight gamble.

During mild winters, little damage is seen. Moderate winter temperatures might result in partial dieback and recovery. Extreme cold – for us those are temperatures in the teens, might kill it to the ground but recovery is normally fast. The potential for cold damage can be greatly reduced by planting it on the Southwest side of a building, solid fence, or other structure.

Bottlebrush can be found at some nurseries and garden centers. Choose a healthy container grown plant and establish it in an area that receives full sunlight, if possible. It is very versatile, finding use as a specimen, hedge, or patio plant. It even works well in small parking lot islands.

Question of the Week: My muscadine grapes appear to be healthy, but have not had fruit for three years. What is wrong with them?

Answer: Your problem is probably due to a lack of pollination. Several of the popular muscadine varieties including scuppernong, Fry, Jumbo, and Summit have only female flowers. In order to set fruit they must receive pollen from male flowered or perfect flowered varieties nearby. The best solution is to plant a few perfect flowered varieties in your vineyard. These varieties have the ability to pollinate their own flowers and produce fruit as well as provide pollen for female varieties in the vicinity. Some perfect flowered varieties, sometimes called pollinator varieties, are Alachua, Carlos, Cowart, Dixie , Noble, Southland, and Welder.

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