
The Palmetto

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Firebush *South Florida's* *Plant for All Seasons*

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Firebush, *Hamelia patens*, is a member of the Rubiaceae, or coffee family, which also contains madder. The genus name, *Hamelia*, honors Henry L. Duhamel du Monceau, an early French botanist; the species name is from the Latin *patens* meaning "open" or "spreading."

Firebush is a showy tropical shrub with cymose clusters of bright red to orange, tubular flowers, 1 to 2 cm long. (A cyme is an inflorescence that has a series of more or less equal branches that bear the flowers.) The elliptic leaves are entire (with smooth edges) and variable in size - from 7 to 15 cm long - and may be opposite or in whorls. The young leaves often are red from tomentum (hairs), and the full sun will tint the older foliage red. The berries are red to black, almost sessile (without stalk or stem), about 6 mm in diameter.

In the wild, firebush is found in hammocks, coastal dunes, and shell mounds, and - not surprisingly - is lime and calcium-tolerant. It is a very good plant for xeric landscaping, and it is tolerant of salt drift. Firebush makes a good accent shrub, and the upright, spreading shape is also good for barrier plantings.

Firebush is cold sensitive, but will grow back from the roots if nipped by a frost. It is also damaged by high winds, and the slender branches are easily broken, which might dictate planting in a sheltered location. Firebush looks its best in semi-shade and flourishes in moist, slightly enriched soils, but will do well in a wide range of conditions. If you want to attract butterflies lies, try for a location that is sunny for part of the day.

Firebush is native to south Florida, the Florida Keys, the West Indies, and tropical America. Its range in Florida is north to

About five years ago, I planted three small firebushes within view of the kitchen window; today they are approximately fifteen feet high.

One of the things I love about my firebushes is how they - and the wildlife attracted to them - change with each season. Seasonal changes are subtle in Florida, so it was a year or two before I recognized the patterns of life revolving around these shrubs.

During the summer when the tubular red and orange flowers are plentiful, this tropical shrub attracts many species of nectaring butterflies - Zebra Longwings, Gulf Fritillaries, Julias, swallowtails, sulphurs, and whites. Passion vine butterflies such as the Zebra Longwing and the Julia seem to have an affinity for the firebush; they are almost always seen in abundance. There is no more beautiful sight to me than these profuse flowers covered with flashing bits of yellow, orange, black, and white.

Ruby-throated Hummingbirds visit regularly summer and fall. I see them appear as I leave for work in the morning and when I return home, and again at dusk. They are very precise in their flight - hovering, assessing, nectaring, occasionally pausing in flight to rest on a nearby branch, their tiny bodies outlined against the sky. Their tininess and iridescent colors make me marvel at the infinite variety of life.

Summer is glory time for the firebush, but even during the winter months - when blooms are not as prolific, when the hummingbirds pay a cursory visit and move on, when it seems that only the long-lived Zebra Longwings are left - there is still life. Brown Thrashers scratch in the leaf and twig litter below, while tiny Blue-gray Gnatcatchers skitter in and out of branches looking for insects. A pair of cardinals come at dusk for the fruit, cheeping back and forth to one another as they rustle the branches and twist the berries off. Mockingbirds flash in and out, bolder than the cardinals, sometimes comically creeping out too far on a slender, brittle branch so they have to fly away before it breaks.

Last winter a pair of Painted Buntings stayed for a week, making the shrubs their base of operation. Lizards and anoles of all sizes are found on the branches and the ground, hunting for insects. Dragonflies light on the wide flat leaves while they pause in their quest for mosquitoes.

Firebush leaves that catch the full sun are suffused with red pigment; the shaded leaves are a velvet green accented by the red petioles.

Although my observation times are limited, I pause and wonder at the life that revolves around this one particular species - life that wasn't a part of the sandy lawn that was there before.

Elizabeth Smith, a past president of the Naples Chapter, has illustrated two FNPS books as well as writing and illustrating articles for the *Palmetto*



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