

Strelitzia species

Bird of Paradise is a spectacular accent plant and again really needs little introduction. With its banana-like foliage and its striking and singular blooms it is rightly a firm favourite as a landscaping feature or as a containerised accent plant indoors or out - handsome flowers aside, this is also a very attractive foliage plant. With its paddle-shaped leathery leaves to about 20cm in length and 15cm in width in clumps to 1m high, Bird of Paradise lends a romantic tropical tone to any landscape.

This is an easy to grow, very non-messy, low maintenance plant that is a good choice for use near pool and patio. It grows quite quickly and is a great choice when you want tough, durable beauty for a new home landscape in warm areas. Used with care and imagination it can be a great addition to the minimalist style gardens that are so popular at present.

Strelitzias like enriched moisture-retentive soils and responds well to fertiliser - feed about once a month during the warm growing season to stimulate rapid growth. When plants attain the desired size you can withhold fertilizer to slow growth and keep the plant in scale. Site it in full sun to part shade. Many of the best specimens are those that receive some shade during the heat of the day. Water when dry but remember it does not like saturated conditions. This plant is reasonably hardy and it can handle brief periods of frost with no damage although leaf damage can occur at temperatures below -2°C unsightly, but rarely fatal. Propagation is easy from seed but note that plants require many years of growth before they begin blooming.

Propagation

Do not chip or mark the seedcoat at all but merely remove the orange tuft and soak for up to 2 hours or overnight (with *Ravenala madagascariensis* seed remove the oily blue seed coating before soaking). Sow the seeds in moist sand, pressing them into the sand until only a small part of the black seed is visible and grow in a temperature of 23°C plus in the dark and ensure that the sand always remains moist. Bottom heat greatly encourages germination.

From 7 days onwards inspect the container once a week and as soon as any bulges, roots or shoots are seen remove the germinated seed and pot up in a compost of half peat and half sand.

Strelitzias often produce a root without a shoot and we have also found that the young shoots and roots are susceptible to fungal attack. Therefore as soon as possible pot up and provide light and fresh air. Germination can start within 7 days and carry on for 6 months or more, although the normal time for germination is three to six weeks at 23°C and above.

Prick seedlings out at about 3 to 4cm into individual tubes and grow on until repotting is required or planting out.

Strelitzia is frost sensitive so protect from frost and only plant out in its final position after the danger of frost has passed. Like many species their frost tolerance increases somewhat with age so it can be advisable to let your seedlings grow on in a protected position to reduce this risk. Although frost will reduce the foliage, possibly to the ground, the plant will normally recover fully unless the soil freezes.

With plants pot up in a medium potting mix that has good drainage and plenty of food or plant out in a bed in full sun in a rich but well-drained soil, but preferably after the risk of frost has passed. Strelitzias like plenty of food and are fast-growing. If potting on them pot up in a pot that allows plenty of room for root growth.

