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FAIRCHILD'S TROPICAL GARDEN COLUMN

## Choose an ornamental for more than just good looks

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Firebush in bloom at Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden.  
Kenneth Setzer / Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden

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Image 1 of 3

BY KENNETH SETZER

FAIRCHILD TROPICAL BOTANIC GARDEN

Beauty alone isn't always enough. If you're looking to plant an ornamental, find one that offers plenty of benefits besides a striking appearance.

Years back I received a gift of a wild coffee (*Psychotria nervosa*) dug right out of the ground and placed in a small pot. It's one of my favorite native plants, but there also happened to be an incidental and very small hitchhiker in that pot coming along for the ride: *Hamelia patens*, aka firebush.

Having recently moved and left behind a beautiful glossy green wild coffee, I was eager to get my new acquisition into a nice sunny location. I lovingly planted it, along with the firebush — also a native — in a sunny area of my yard. Before long the firebush had radically overtaken the wild

coffee in height and breadth.

Known as a fast grower, the firebush has olive-green and slightly tapered elliptical leaves growing, usually three, but occasionally a few more, to a node. Its inflorescence results in crimson to orange trumpet-shaped groupings of flowers which, when open, are a great attraction to hummingbirds and butterflies.

The firebush can be kept to a good shrub size of six to eight feet with pruning, but be aware that aggressive pruning will inhibit blooming. It does well in direct sun, but bright shade is acceptable; just bear in mind it can get "leggy" if it needs to stretch to seek the light. Here in South Florida, it can grow to 15 feet.

My particular plant has grown to about 12 feet so far. Probably because of competition for sun from some impudent neighboring areca palms, it grew sparse and quite woody towards the base, resulting in more of a fire "tree" than a firebush. Some prudent pruning on my part might have kept its shape closer to that of a bush. Occasional pruning also encourages denser blooms, but it is nevertheless still a strikingly attractive member of my yard.

What are the benefits of planting firebush besides its pretty flowers? Since it is a tropical plant, and native to Florida, it requires practically no care once established in our zone, which doesn't take long if you plant in the spring or summer. It does just fine in our rocky, alkaline soil and is heat and drought-tolerant. You can buy it at local nurseries and native plant sales. And though it's a rapid grower, it won't attempt a takeover of your yard.

But it gets better. Firebush blooms throughout the year, attracting butterflies and hummingbirds with its flowers and other birds with its fruit, a small, juicy berry. I've had the pleasure of watching Zebra Longwing butterflies feeding by the dozen, Giant Swallowtails, Julias, Gulf Fritillaries, various sulphur butterflies, plus skippers and moths I couldn't properly identify. Birds I've watched flock to the firebush include Ruby-Throated Hummingbirds, Painted Buntings, Cardinals, and Prairie Warblers. It's proven to be a veritable tree of life!

All this, plus the firebush provides regular explosions of ornamental crimson and orange flowers, asking only for your gaze and appreciation in return.

Kenneth Setzer is writer and editor at Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden

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