

Friday's Feature

By

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### **Attract hummingbirds and butterflies to your garden with the bottlebrush plant**

With bright color and unique flower form, the bottlebrush has many good characteristics to offer Southern landscapes. Bottlebrush is a beautiful, evergreen shrub or small tree exhibiting bright red flower color from late spring through fall.

The unique flower form gives this plant its common name and perfectly describes the bright red flower spikes. 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.

The dramatic flowers are the primary reason for its popularity. Not only are they pretty and unique, but these blooms also attract hummingbirds and butterflies. The flowers are followed by small, woody capsules that look like bead bracelets on the bark which last for years. Stems including the fruit are often used in dried arrangements.

Bottlebrush shrub is a plant that was once very popular and is often seen in the deep South. Apparently, a series of hard freezes (low teens) reduced the numbers and it has never made a popular comeback.

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

There are few limitations to growing bottlebrush. It prefers sun for most of the day and is tolerant of most soils except heavy, poorly drained sites. Expect a moderate rate of growth— not too fast and not too slow. There are no significant pest problems. In addition, the bottlebrush can withstand considerable drought and salt spray.

As a dense evergreen shrub, the bottlebrush can easily be used in a variety of ways. Offered as a shrub, bottlebrush can be trained as a tree or espaliered as a quick wall cover. Suckers from the trunk need to be removed periodically to maintain a nice tree form. It also makes a nice screen or tall unclipped hedge. Pruning to develop several trunks and removing some lower branches can create a fine small specimen tree.

Bottlebrushes belong in the genus *Callistemon* and there are about 34 different species, as well as several

cultivars. There are only a few types of bottlebrush commonly used. Lemon Bottlebrush (*Callistemon citrinus*) is a small upright tree or large shrub with graceful branches that may reach 10 to 15 feet high and wide. Its nearly needle-like foliage has a lemon fragrance when bruised. Stiff Bottlebrush (*C. rigidus*) is likely the most cold hardy and drought tolerant yet is least graceful in form. Weeping Bottlebrush (*C. viminalis*), although beautiful in form and flower, may not survive winters on the Gulf Coast.

Don't let its lackluster name dissuade you from using a bottlebrush shrub in your landscape. The late spring, early summer blooms will convince once and for all that perhaps it should have been given a name more glamorous.

Theresa Friday is the Residential Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others.

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