

CORAL TREES IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

PHILIP EDWARD CHANDLER

MOST GARDEN-MINDED property owners in Southern California know the coral tree, *Erythrina*. Few persons realize that there are seven distinct species and one hybrid from which to make specimen selections in the Los Angeles nurseries today. There is never a month in the year when at least one of the corals is not in bloom. Blossom color ranges from light shrimp-orange, *E. lysistemon*, and light bronzed red of high light intensity, *E. crista-galli*, through various shades of orange and orange-red to pure red, *E. bidwilli* and *E. coralloides*. Most forms of this genus are deciduous or almost so, and all possess strong structural value in or out of leaf.

Erythrina caffra (formerly known as *E. embryana* and as *E. constantiana*) is the largest growing, at least twenty-five feet in height, with an ultimate spread of at least forty feet. It starts the calendar year by dropping its heavy canopy of leaves early in January, or earlier if weather is hot and dry, and bursting into bloom immediately if there is plenty of sun. Its large, heavy clusters of burnt orange flowers drip with honey. Some years it breaks into solid color overnight, some seasons sparingly, with its great show in late winter, usually winding up in early March in a mass of fresh, bright green leaves as gay and lush as its flowers. This African native is a bit tender to frost. It usually blooms best where there is no lawn around it; its roots should not be overly wet at any season. Some specimens bloom early in life, others not until long established. Where space permits, there is no equal for its great limb spread, its strongly tropical look.

Erythrina speciosa furnishes the design-conscious gardener with a thorny, free-form small tree, crooked and interesting

with very large compound leaves, ribbed above and hairy beneath. Flowers appear in early spring (following mild winters) at branch ends, firecracker like, a brilliant light orange-red. Normally, the plant's height will achieve twelve to fifteen feet. It likes hot sun, tolerates little frost and prefers light watering when mature.

The most recent addition to California's corals is *E. falcata*. So far, three years, it has remained green throughout the winter and grown exceedingly well. Most of the plants in the market are not old enough to bloom. Any particular weakness and growing needs have not been determined, but the prevalence of this species in southeastern South America indicates considerable water tolerance.

Best known of the pure red corals is *Erythrina coralloides* (formerly known incorrectly as *E. poianthes*). It is a March through May performer of gaudiest poinsettia scarlet on naked, twisted boughs. This species is somewhat more cold hardy than *E. caffra* and *E. speciosa*, achieves medium height and spread, twenty-five by twenty-five feet, and seems to bloom equally well with lawn watering or in a drier exposure. Its shade is dense, its foliage brilliant yellow in late fall and its limb structure when bare is strongly bizarre and arresting.

From the rainy sections of Brazil, comes the coral longest in cultivation in California, *Erythrina crista-galli*. It is probably the species responsible for the popular name "coral tree," because the long, thorny spikes of light bronze-red flowers appear coral in color from a slight distance. This species varies greatly from seed, a superior strain preserved only when propagated vegetatively. In areas of heavy frost, all



Two clusters of the pure red flowers of *E. coralloides*. Blooming period is from March through May. Photo courtesy of Huntington Botanic Garden

growth dies back each season, followed by copious blossoms on new growth the following summer and fall. Where frosts are light to absent, this species grows to a multiple-trunked tree of fifteen to twenty feet height and spread. But wherever or however grown, old bloom carrying limbs should be cut back severely immediately after blossoms are past. This method of pruning results in several waves of bloom—in mild areas, three or sometimes four blooming periods—spring, summer, fall and occasionally winter in fairly rapid succession.

Erythrina bidwilli, a hybrid between *E. herbacea* (which is not in the Southern California markets) and *E. crista-galli*, is usually a shrub but occasionally tree-like after some years. It is the most cold hardy

of the corals, bearing long, willowy limbs with many spikes of purest red flowers. It blooms from the advent of warm weather until early the following winter, provided the spent blooms are carefully removed and no dead wood is allowed to accumulate. Culturally, *E. bidwilli* has wide tolerance but it prefers fairly good drainage, hot sun and an uncramped position.

Fast becoming one of the most popular and significant of the coral species grown here is *Erythrina humeana*. It is a fairly recent introduction from Africa. One of its best attributes is the extremely early age at which it begins to flaunt its brilliant red-orange banners. A second stamp of merit is its long season of great show—July to December. The third feature is its speed of growth; and fourth, its medium size

maximum height which permits its use in fairly small gardens. Although frankly deciduous, December to March, it is questionably hardy in cold areas. Culturally it seems equally happy with lots of water (except perhaps in cold weather) or with very little, in heavy soil or sandy.

A large tree, less fast growing than most, with generally poorer quality foliage is *Erythrina lysistemon* (formerly mistaken for *E. caffra*). This species is one of

the older corals in California. In mild seasons, its orange flowers occur in abundance intermittently from October to May, rarely in summer. Its numerous black thorns on light beige to gray bark are conspicuous features on young trees. Established specimens tolerate occasional intense cold of brief duration. It does poorly in heavy, wet soils and blooms much better outside lawn areas.

Evans and Reeves Nursery

NAMES, NOTES AND NEWS

BIRD NOTES

The extensive development and increased activities at LASCA seem not to have made any noticeable changes in the bird life. The rare resident, the Red-bellied hawk nested last spring. Other residents: the Pied-billed grebe, Redwing, Mourning dove, Tule yellow-throat, Black phoebe and Song sparrow are still plentiful. Winter visitors such as: Chipping, Gambel and Fox sparrows, Canvas back, Shoveler and Ruddy duck came in this fall. Two new additions to our bird list, the Buffle-head duck and the Wilson snipe (bringing the official count to 165) were seen this fall.

Last spring we saw two beautiful wild ducks, probably a pair, out on the lagoon. These ducks were not listed in any of the North American bird books. Our guess is that they were gypsy-footed ducks from Mexico or Central America, probably a romantic lad and lassie who were 'born the next of kin to the wayward wind' and just couldn't resist the temptation to spend a day or so at the scenic and historic lake.

An invitation is extended to all to come and enjoy the hobby of bird watching. The Arboretum sponsors early morning bird walks on the first and third Sundays of each month. These walks start from the Gatehouse, 301 N. Baldwin Ave., at about 8:00 a.m. and last approximately one hour and a half. Mr. Gerry Patten, Arboretum Research Aid, conducts the walk.

W. DAN QUATTLEBAUM

Annual Descanso Gardens Camellia Show to Attract National Attention. Camellias from southern and western states of the nation will compete with locally grown Southern California Camellias at the Annual Descanso Gardens Camellia Show in La Canada, California from March 2 through March 10, 1957. Co-sponsoring the Camellia Show will be the Los Angeles Camellia Council, Ltd., and the Department of Parks and Recreation of Los Angeles County. On the closing days, March 9 and 10, a special Camellia Arrangement Show will be presented which will feature Camellias in flower arrangements of every conceivable type.

LASCA LEAVES REPRINTS

The Arboretum will furnish reprints of articles appearing in *Lasca Leaves* at the following prices:

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COVER PICTURE

Against fresh white clouds and blue sky, stands the new Administration Building of the Los Angeles State and County Arboretum. This building and its facilities marks a high point in the planning and development of the Arboretum. In time, other buildings, greenhouses, and workshops

will be added; however, none will create the feeling of establishment which this building announces to the horticultural world and the people of the Arboretum. All hail this edifice—long and distinguished may its history be. Photo by L. B. Martin.



Chandler, Philip Edward. 1957. "Coral trees in Southern California." *Lasca leaves* 7, 19–21.

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