

Hamelia patens Firebush, Scarlet Bush¹

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Introduction

This charming Florida native will delight everyone with beautiful orange-red flowers throughout most of the year. Firebush is a large, soft-stemmed shrub that reaches a height and width of 8 to 12 feet tall without support. A one-foot-tall specimen that is planted in the spring can be expected to reach 5 feet or more by the following winter. It can grow to 15 feet tall or more if given support on a trellis or other structure. Its evergreen leaves are covered with red tomentum (hairs) when young and are speckled with red or purple at maturity. The petiole and young stems also appear red. These attractive leaves are commonly arranged in whorls of 3. Bright orange-red flowers appear in forking cymes at the tips of the branches throughout the year. The slender flowers are tubular and reach a length of 1 to 1 ½ inches. Although tolerant of shade, flowering is much reduced.



Figure 1. Full Form - *Hamelia patens*: Firebush, Scarlet Bush
Credits: Edward F. Gilman, UF/IFAS



Figure 2. Leaf - *Hamelia patens*: Firebush, Scarlet Bush
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Figure 3. Flower - *Hamelia patens*: Firebush, Scarlet Bush
Credits: Edward F. Gilman, UF/IFAS



Figure 4. Fruit - *Hamelia patens*: Firebush, Scarlet Bush
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General Information

Scientific name: *Hamelia patens*

Pronunciation: huh-MEE-lee-uh PAY-tenz

Common name(s): firebush, scarlet bush

Family: *Rubiaceae*

Plant type: shrub

USDA hardiness zones: 9 through 11 (Figure 5)

Planting month for zone 9: Apr; May; Jun; Jul; Aug; Sep

Planting month for zone 10 and 11: Feb; Mar; Apr; May; Jun; Jul; Aug; Sep; Oct; Nov; Dec

Origin: native to Florida

Invasive potential: not known to be invasive

Uses: specimen; accent; screen; border; mass planting; attracts butterflies; attracts hummingbirds



Figure 5. Shaded area represents potential planting range.

Description

Height: 6 to 12 feet

Spread: 5 to 8 feet

Plant habit: spreading

Plant density: dense

Growth rate: fast

Texture: medium

Foliage

Leaf arrangement: whorled

Leaf type: simple

Leaf margin: undulate

Leaf shape: ovate

Leaf venation: brachidodrome; pinnate

Leaf type and persistence: evergreen

Leaf blade length: 4 to 8 inches

Leaf color: green

Fall color: red

Fall characteristic: showy

Flower

Flower color: orange-red

Flower characteristic: year-round flowering

Fruit

Fruit shape: oval

Fruit length: less than 0.5 inch

Fruit cover: fleshy

Fruit color: black

Fruit characteristic: suited for human consumption; attracts birds

Trunk and Branches

Trunk/bark/branches: typically multi-trunked or clumping stems; not particularly showy

Current year stem/twig color: reddish

Current year stem/twig thickness: medium

Culture

Light requirement: plant grows in part shade/part sun; plant grows in the shade

Soil tolerances: occasionally wet; acidic; alkaline; sand; loam; clay

Drought tolerance: moderate

Soil salt tolerances: poor

Plant spacing: 36 to 60 inches

Other

Roots: usually not a problem

Winter interest: plant has winter interest due to unusual form, nice persistent fruits, showy winter trunk, or winter flowers

Outstanding plant: plant has outstanding ornamental features and could be planted more

Pest resistance: no serious pests are normally seen on the plant

Use and Management

Hummingbirds and butterflies enjoy the nectar in the flowers. The small, black, glossy fruits are rounded and can be eaten. There is a continuous crop of these seedy fruits and birds are quite fond of them. The sap has been used to treat skin rashes. The firebush can be used as a foundation plant for large buildings and is superb when placed in the background of a mass of shrubs in a border. It is excellent in a mass planting and functions well as a screen or border. A hedge of firebush will need regular clipping. Flowers are often removed during this process.

Hamelia patens can be found growing naturally in a variety of situations in Florida from Sumter County southward. However, it grows best when well supplied with moisture and prefers a full sun to partial shade location in the landscape. This plant can take heat and drought, but a strong wind can cause some leaf browning. Though native, it is quite tender and can be killed to the ground during a freeze. Regrowth from the roots is rapid and rampant, and it has proven to be root hardy through zone 9. It functions very well as an annual in more northerly zones. The firebush is known to be tolerant of the lime bearing (high soil pH) soils of southern Florida. Fertilize this plant sparingly to bring out its best characteristics, and do not allow lawn grasses to invade its root zone.

Propagate *Hamelia patens* by seed (which must be fresh), cuttings, or air-layers.

Pest and Diseases

Occasional attacks of scales or mites may require control measures. New growth may be attacked by aphids in early spring, but natural predators often rapidly check the invasion. In south Florida, larvae of a moth species sometimes partially defoliate the stems, but they are easily controlled if you wish.