

## **Bird-of-Paradise Bush (*Caesalpinia gilliesii*)**

We all enjoy the changing flower displays in the Show Dome, but have you taken the time to look at some of the perennial plants growing around the outer edge? A new plant has been added that is known as the bird-of-paradise bush or yellow bird of paradise. This plant originated in tropical South America, especially in Argentina, but it is now widely grown and naturalized throughout dry areas of Central and South America and the southwestern states. It is unrelated to the other bird of paradise (*Strelitzia*) with the large orange flowers, sometimes used in flower arrangements, that originated in South Africa. This is another example of the confusion that common plant names can cause.

Our new plant has beautiful flowers with 5 yellow petals and 10 long red stamens that extend several inches beyond the petals. It blooms throughout the spring and summer months until fall. The flowers open over a 4-hour period and are fragrant. This plant is a member of the legume (Fabaceae) family, so it produces pods just like pea and bean plants. However, these pods and seeds are poisonous. When they dry out and turn tan-colored, they explosively open to distribute their seeds. Even when not blooming, the leaves are attractive. They are bipinnately (doubly) compound with small bluishgreen leaflets that give the foliage a fernlike look. Like many members of the legume family, the bird-of-paradise bush can fix its own nitrogen from the soil because of specialized bacteria living in root nodules.

There are many species of plants in the genus *Caesalpinia* in the tropical world. The genus was named to honor an important 16<sup>th</sup> century Italian botanist, Andrea Cesalpino. He collected many plants and tried to organize them based on their fruits and seeds. This was an important step forward in the use of scientific plant classification that continued with the 18<sup>th</sup> century work of Linnaeus who started our modern naming system. Thanks to Jeff Schaffer, a Friends of the Domes board member, for his donation of this interesting new plant to the Show Dome.

Photo by G. A. Cooper, courtesy of Smithsonian Institution.

