

Erythrina herbacea

Coral-bean, cardinal-spear, Cherokee-bean

Family: Fabaceae

Flower Display: B



S. H. Brown

Fort Myers, Florida

Late March



S. H. Brown

Orlando, Florida

Late April

Natural Geographic Distribution

Erythrina herbacea is found throughout Florida. It is native from South Carolina, southward to Florida, west to Texas and into northeastern Mexico. In Florida it is more abundant in coastal thickets, hardwood hammocks and along forest edges.

Growth Habit

In its northern range the species is mostly a multi-stemmed gangly shrub. In south Florida it can take the form of a small tree with irregular branches and one or more short trunks. The small tree is mostly taller than broad. It has small recurved prickles on its trunks, stems and leaves. There are no recognized cultivars. *E. herbacea* is generally unattractive in the winter, with most treelets becoming deciduous or semi-deciduous. Some plants will remain leafless even into May. A few others will remain evergreen all year. One might consider an evergreen companion plant to lessen the unsightliness of those leafless plants.

Flowering Habit

Erythrina herbacea seems to hold a loose blooming schedule. It typically flowers in the spring but does not do so in unison. A few treelets will bloom again in the fall. Most trees will lose their leaves in winter and flower shortly thereafter. Flowering is on nearly leafless plants. However, some few trees are evergreen when flowering. The stem tips produce long, upright racemes. The florets are tubular, very slender, coral to deep red in color and attractive to hummingbirds. They never fully open. Many florets develop into a drooping green fruit that is constricted between the seeds. It dries black and splits open in the summer or fall, depending on the time of flowering. The split fruits reveal bright red, poisonous seeds, which may be attractive to children. Caution is advised.

Growing Conditions

An adaptable species, it grows in a wide range of soil, from acidic to alkaline, but it does best in drier, fertile, well-drained, sandy soil. Excellent for a Florida natural landscape, it can be planted anytime of year in south Florida. It flowers best in full sun or light shade. Water it well to get it established. After establishment, it does better if kept on the dry side. Over watering could curtail its already relatively short life. In prolonged moist soils it is not well rooted and is likely to topple in a storm. Properly maintained trees can live beyond 20 years, and become more ornate with time. Pruning after flowering is only necessary to encourage a bushier crown and more inflorescence. In Northern Florida, this species occasionally dies back to the ground in winter, but is renewed by the spring weather. Further north, it can be treated as an annual.

Uses

Use it as a small tree or a clambering shrub. It is often used to give woodland planting an informal, naturalistic effect. It is also excellent as an accent or specimen plant. The bright red flowers add beautiful highlights to any landscape. It can be planted along a fence where it will climb alone and cover it. Propagation is from seeds.



Leaves: Trifoliate, the middle leaflet the largest, with ovate pointed tip leaflets, alternate, entire, to 9 inches long, often with short recurved prickles on petioles and leaf axils

Flowers: Floret, coral to deep red, hanging slightly downward, about 2 inches long, on short-stalked borne on upright terminal racemes that are up to 2 feet long

Fruits: Pods, brown, constricted between seeds, dehiscent, to 8 inches long

Seeds: Bright red, with a black line near the helium, 0.33 inches long

Coral-Bean

Synonym: *Erythrina arborea*

Origin: South Carolina, Florida to Texas, Northeastern Mexico

Zone: 8a—12 a, 10°F minimum

Growth Rate: Medium

Flowering Month(s): March —June, sometimes October—November

Leaf Persistence: Deciduous or evergreen

Messiness: Medium

Salt Tolerance: High

Drought Tolerance: High

Nutritional Requirements: Medium

Typical Dimension: 16' x 14'

Potential Major Pests: Erythrina stem borer

Uses: Buffer planting; garden; park; seaside; specimen



Stem with recurved spines.



Dehiscent fruits with red seeds exposed. Early July



A mid-aged trunk

Erythrina Stem Borer



Left to right: Erythrina stem borer, showing larval damage, an Erythrina shoot opened to show larva, and the adult moth.

Erythrina herbacea may be attacked by the Erythrina stem borer, *Terastia meticulosalis*. The borers can significantly reduce flowering and new growth. The larva is a caterpillar, the adult is a moth. There are insecticides that can help to alleviate this problem or simply prune off the affected parts.

Erythrina Leafroller



The species is occasionally bothered by a leaf-rolling caterpillar. Pictured are the juvenile caterpillar and adult moth.

Erythrina Gall Wasp



Leafminer



The Erythrina gall wasp, *Quadrastichus erythrinae*, was discovered as a new species in 2004. It was first reported in Miami-Dade County in October, 2006. By February 2007 it was reported in Lee and Broward Counties. It causes major damage to the leaves and growing tips of *E. variegata* but appears to cause only minor damage to *E. herbacea*. Most *E. herbacea* observed are free of this pest. Leafminers are tiny insects that feed between the blades of leaves. They are not an important pest of *E. herbacea*.

This fact sheet was reviewed by Cathy Feser, Collier County Extension; Peggy Cruz, Lee County Extension Service; Jenny Evans, Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation; John Sibley, Lee County Master Gardener and owner of All Native Garden Center, Nursery & Landscapes, Fort Myers, and Lyle Buss, Entomologist, University of Florida, Gainesville.