

Bird of Paradise



Strelitzia reginae

The **Bird of Paradise** produces spectacular garden flowers with brilliant orange and blue petals, and has large, bluish-green leathery leaves, not unlike those of bananas. In fact, until recently, *Strelitzia* was classified as a genus within the **Musaceae**, the **Banana** family, and was only recently placed in the **Strelitziaceae**. *Strelitzia* is a native of the Cape Province of South Africa where the flowers are



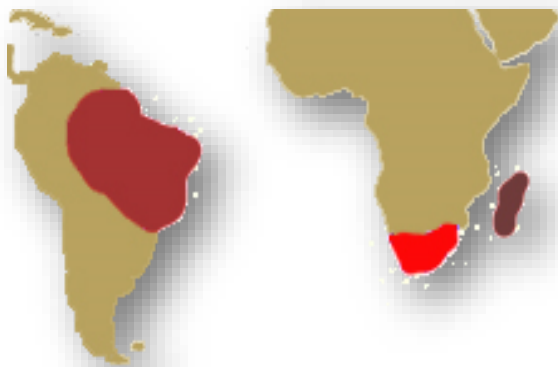
visited by **Sunbirds**, but not pollinated by them. Sunbirds steal nectar without contributing to pollination. The nectary is covered by convoluted bases of petals which reduce nectar theft by sunbirds, but are probably more effective at deterring nectar theft by insects. However, another bird, the *Weaver Bird*, does pollinate

Strelitzia, visiting the flowers, perching on the blue petal and contacting both anthers and stigma. *Strelitzia reginae* in its native habitat in South Africa grows on river banks and cleared areas of coastal scrub.

The first *Strelitzia* plants were brought to Australia by sailing ships in the early days of European settlement so they have been popular with Australian gardeners seemingly forever. However, if you are tempted to plant one at home, make sure you plant it in a location from which you will never, ever need to move it. *Strelitzia* plants are like icebergs, only a small part is visible above the ground. You may well need a bobcat or even a bulldozer to remove an old, established plant.



The three genera in the family **Strelitziaceae** have an interesting distribution. ***Strelitzia*** (5 species) occur in southern Africa, ***Ravenala madagascariensis***, the Travellers' Palm, comes from Madagascar and ***Phenakospermum guianense*** can be found in the Amazon basin of South America.



In 1773, *Strelitzia* was brought to England by Sir Joseph Banks and since then has become popular worldwide as a garden plant and for its cut flowers. And why the name? **Sir Joseph Banks** named it for **Charlotte of Mecklenburg-Strelitz**, the queen consort of **King George III** of England, as the queen was a keen amateur botanist and involved in the development and expansion of **Kew Gardens**. Surprisingly, especially as it is not a native of North America, *Strelitzia* is the Official Flower of the City of Los Angeles.

Distribution in South Africa, map modified from: Victor, J.E. & Dold, A.P. 2005. *Strelitzia reginae* Banks ex Aiton subsp. *reginae*. National Assessment: Red List of South African Plants version 2017.1. Accessed on 2017/05/25

Coombs, G, Peter C I. 2009 Do floral traits of *Strelitzia reginae* limit nectar theft by sunbirds? South African Journal of Botany, 75(4): 751-756.

English Monarchs: http://www.englishmonarchs.co.uk/hanover_14.html

Kew Science, Plants of the World on-line:

<http://powo.science.kew.org/taxon/urn:lsid:ipni.org:names:798194-1>

Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Strelitzia_reginae

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Queen Charlotte of Mecklenburg-Strelitz, patron of the arts and keen amateur botanist. Photo: Johann Georg Ziesenis [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons



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