

Plant of the Week  
**Bird of Paradise**  
*Strelitzia reginae*



Sunbird and *Strelitzia*

The *Bird of Paradise* is one of our most spectacular garden flowers, with brilliant orange and blue petals and large, 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 pollinated by **Sunbirds**. When a **Sunbird** stands on the blue petals to sip nectar, the petals open and the bird's feet are coated with pollen which is transferred to the next *Strelitzia* flower visited<sup>1</sup>. In South Africa *Strelitzia* is usually known as the **Crane Flower**.

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 Traveler's Palm comes from Madagascar and *Phenakospermum guianense* can be found in the Amazon basin of South America<sup>2</sup>. *Ravenala*, the Traveler's Palm, is so named because the sheaths of stems hold rainwater; however, there is a lovely horticultural fraud that surrounds this plant. Visitors to botanic gardens often notice that the fan of fronds point north-south, supposedly indicating direction for those lost in the wilderness. But this is a hoax perpetrated by canny gardeners who remove any or all offsets that might point in any direction other than north!



*Ravenala madagascariensis* –  
Traveller's Palm

*Strelitzia* and Sunbird: <http://www.outdoorphoto.co.za/>

*Ravenala madagascariensis*:

<http://www.mgonlinestore.com/Traveler/>

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.sayers-strelitzia.com.au/reginae.html>

<sup>2</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phenakospermum>

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