

Firebush

(*Hamelia patens* var. *patens*)

For definitions of botanical terms, visit en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glossary_of_botanical_terms.

Firebush is a hardy, fast-growing and showy evergreen shrub to small tree found in hardwood hammocks and coastal and upland forests. It typically blooms spring through fall but can bloom year-round in warmer climates. Its nectar-filled flowers vary in length, attracting both butterflies and hummingbirds. Its berries are plentiful and are eaten by a variety of birds and small mammals. They are also edible to humans, although the taste is not particularly desirable.

Firebush produces clusters of bright orange to red thinly tubular flowers.

Leaves are elliptical to ovate with entire margins and pointed tips. Petioles and veins are often reddish. Leaf arrangement is usually whorled but may be opposite. Fruits are small green berries that turn red and then purplish-black as they mature. They are born in clusters.

The genus name *Hamelia* honors the French botanist Henry Louis Hamel de Monceau (1700–1782). The species epithet *patens* is Latin for “spreading” or “to be open” and refers to the plant’s growth habit.

Leaves, stems and flowers have many medicinal properties including anti-inflammatory, analgesic and diuretic treatments.

Family: Rubiaceae (Madder or coffee family)

Native range: Central and southern peninsula from Marion County south

To see where natural populations of Firebush have been vouchered, visit www.florida.plantatlas.usf.edu.

Hardiness: Zones 8B–11

Soil: Dry to moist, sandy, somewhat alkaline soils

Exposure: Full sun to full shade

Growth habit: Up to 10’ tall, with 3–6’+ spread

Propagation: Seed, cuttings

Garden tips: Firebush is one of Florida’s best plants for attracting butterflies and birds. It can be used as a specimen plant or in a border or mass planting. It is relatively tolerant of salt and wind and is a moderately fast grower. Plant in full sun for best flowering or more shade for attractive flowers.

Caution: Avoid nonnative varieties of Firebush, particularly *H. patens* var. *glabra* (frequently sold as African, Dwarf or Compact firebush), as it may interbreed with the native firebush. Calusa firebush is a native cultivar that may be used if a more compact size is desired.

Firebush is often available at nurseries that specialize in native plants. Visit PlantRealFlorida.org to find a native nursery on your area.



Photo by Mary Keim