

Coral Trees

by: Kathy Pyle



Genus

- ▶ Coral Trees (Genus - *Erythrina* and Family - Fabaceae) are primarily found in South Africa and South America, They are also found in Mexico, Central America, the West Indies, Asia, Australia, and even Hawaii. The wide area covered by the plants seems to indicate coastal dispersal of seeds.

Coral Tree

► The average height of a Coral Tree is 35 to 45 feet (11-14 m.) tall, but some varieties exceed 60 feet (18 m.) in height. The leaves have three distinct leaflets, and the stems may have thorns or may be smooth, depending upon their evolutionary adaptations. The trees have a thick trunk, usually with several smaller trunks joining the main stem. Roots push out of the ground as they age and may become a hazard. The bark is a thin grayish brown, and the wood is pithy and weak, prone to breaking in the wind or due to overwatering.





- Some interesting Coral Tree information regards their extremely buoyant seeds, which have the ability to float for up to one year, "Sea Beans", and are so hard they pass unharmed through animal and bird digestive tracts. These tough seeds wind up tossed from surf onto fertile tropical soils where they take off and eventually adapt and evolve to take advantage of their environment.



The alkaloids are present in all parts of the plant, but especially in the flowers and seeds. All the alkaloids have toxic effects when ingested. They cause paralysis and can be fatal. They were used for medicinal purposes by indigenous people.



Birds

- Many birds visit the nectar-rich Coral Tree flowers. Large Hummingbirds in the Neotropics. In southeast Asia the Black Drongo and the Mynas. Lorikeets are known to consume large amounts of Coral Tree nectar.



- ▶ Coral Trees need very little water. Too much water actually promotes a weak limb structure and subsequent breakage. Overwatering causes the tree to grow too quickly, and its soft wood cannot support such spurts. Then in the dry season, the weight of the tree can actually pull it out of the soil. Pruning the tree in spring to remove the heavier stems or any damaged material will help prevent limb loss and trees from tipping. Fertilizer is also not recommended when growing Coral Trees. Fertilizer also causes them to have aggressive growth that can cause problems later. Cover over the root zone with a good organic mulch, which will gradually leach a light dose of nutrients into soil over time.



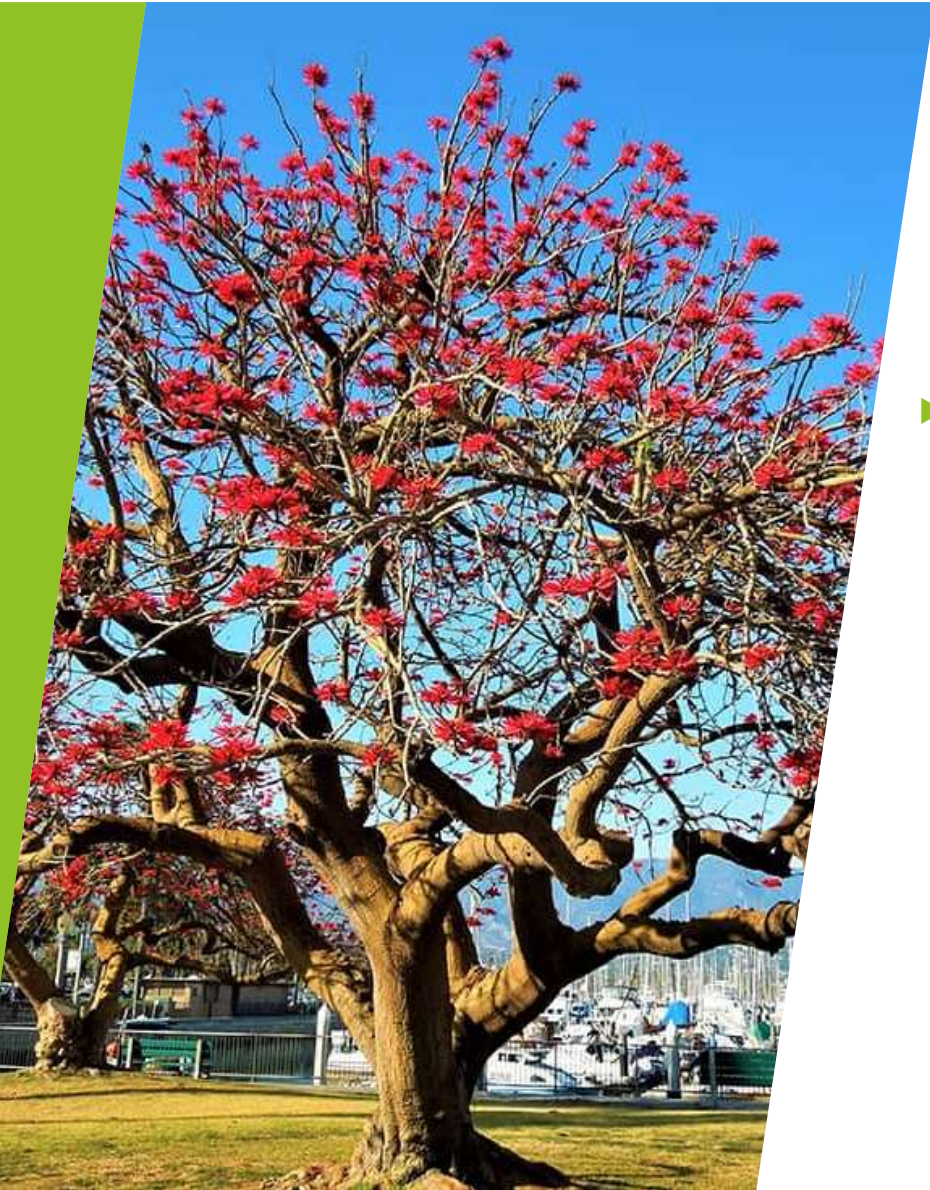
- ▶ Coral Tree leaves are used as food plants by the larvae of the Lepidoptera species including the swift moth, and the woolly bears *Hypercompe eridanus* and *Hypercompe icasia*. The mite *Tydeus munsteri* is a pest on the coastal coral tree.



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Flower

- ▶ The flowers are the standout, appearing in late winter. They are outlandish constructions of thick, bright petals standing erect around the corolla. They are known to have bright red flowers but also have varieties, *E. sandwicensis*, that have orange, yellow, salmon, green and white flowers. Hummingbirds are extremely attracted to the loud colors and striking scent.



- Some Coral Trees in the tropics are used widely as street and park trees. They provide shade and protection. The Coral Tree is the official Los Angeles city tree. Cockspur Coral Tree is the national flower of Argentina and Uruguay.

- ▶ Root tubers of Coral Trees have been traditional food for the aborigines of the Northern Territory of Australia





- ▶ Native Hawaiians used the trunks of the Coral Tree to make canoes and Olo Long surf Boards.