

CORAL BEANS

The Coral Bean plant is in the *Fabaceae* or legume family of plants and of the Genus *Erythrina*. There are two common species of the plants known as Coral Bean plants in the southern United States. The *Erythrina herbacea* is found primarily in the southern portion of the states bordering the Gulf of Mexico and the *Erythrina flabelliformis* that is found primarily in New Mexico, Arizona, Baja California and Sonora Mexico. This document discusses the *Erythrina flabelliformis* or Southwestern Coral Bean. It is also known by the name “Chilicote”.

The Coral Bean is a deciduous, perennial plant whose size and configuration is determined by its environment. In frost-free areas with adequate moisture it can grow into a tree shape up to 15 feet tall. Generally in southern Arizona you will find a low thorny shrub that will die back to the root structure each winter and will send out new shoots each spring. The plants that I have seen in Southern Arizona have generally been no more than two or three feet tall. The plant thrives in desert conditions and grows best in dry rocky soil. In the spring, the plants root structure sends out woody flower stalks that may appear before the plant leafs out. Long, red tubular flowers will form in a cluster at the end of the flower stalk. The plant is normally pollinated by hummingbirds who are attracted to the bright red flowers. Uncultivated plants (wild plants) are leafless most of the year but produce produces green fan-shaped leaflets during the summer monsoon.

All parts of the plant are poisonous to humans but the red beans are particularly toxic. This plant contains Erythrina alkaloids, which include the curare-like beta-erythroidine. In some cultures, the seeds and other portions of the plant are used as poisons to kill rats and dogs. The seeds also contain erythroidine (causes hallucinations) and were used by the ancient Aztrecs as a hallucinogen in order to communicate with their gods.



Coral Bean Plant in a Typical Environment in the Santa Rita Mountains. T. Johnson Photo



Coral Bean Pods
Photo by T. Johnson

Summary prepared by T. Johnson in May 2014 various web sites

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