

December
2020

Plant of the Month

Common Name: Red Tower Ginger
Scientific Name: *Costus comosus* var. *bakeri*
(K.Schum.) Maas
Family: Costaceae
Etymology
Genus: *Costus* – spiral-flag, latin
for imported aromatic root
Species: *comosus* - bearing hairs on
leaves

Distribution

Southern Mexico to Ecuador including Guatemala, El Salvador, Panama and Colombia.

Native Habitat

Wooded slopes between 600 and 1300 meters often on soils of volcanic origin.

Description

A large clump forming perennial that produces long canes up to 2 m tall from an underground rhizome. New canes have a spiraling habit and leaves are arranged spirally along the stem. Leaves are large, mid-green and have downy hairs on the under surface that are soft to touch.

Flowers

Bright yellow tubular flowers emerge from large showy terminal clusters of red bracts with leaf like appendages.

Location in Garden

Various locations including: Next to the Visitor Centre, Spring Walk (beds 30 & 31), Tropical Garden.

Information

This variety is often misnamed in horticulture as *Costus barbatus*, a critically endangered species from Costa Rica. It does not have the leaf-like appendages on the red floral bracts like *Costus comosus* var. *bakeri*.

Costus is the largest and most diverse member of the Costaceae family comprising over 80 species, including one in Australia, *Costus dubius*. The large red terminal bracts of *Costus comosus* var. *bakeri* attract birds who see clearly in the red colour spectrum. The nectar rich tubular yellow flowers with a small opening only allow small birds with long beaks to access the nectar. In the Americas, these birds are often hummingbirds such as the Magnificent Hummingbird (*Eugenes fulgens*) pictured. These species don't occur in our Garden but you may see Noisy or Indian Miner birds visiting the flowers of Red Tower Ginger in search of nectar. They often pull the flowers of plants and access the nectar from the base of the fallen flower.

Costus comosus var. *bakeri* is a hardy perennial for sub-tropical and sheltered warm temperate gardens, where it performs best with morning sun, well composted soil and regular watering. Remove canes to ground level after flowering.



  
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