

Plant a Parrot Pen?

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The Phoenix Zoo is fortunate to have a mild climate which allows us to keep our birds outside year round. The climate is also conducive to growing many lovely native and, with some extra water, tropical plants. This combination allows us the luxury of lush, beautiful exhibits at comparative ease and modest expense. We have discovered on some of our soft-billed enclosures, which are heavily planted, that the mulch and abundance of plants have created mini-habitats that require minimal extra water and care once they are established.

It has often been thought that planting a hookbill enclosure is an impossibility, but thanks to our flexible landscaping department, we have experimented with several plants and have found some that hookbills tend to ignore.

Our hookbill enclosures are partially covered with wood to protect birds and plants should the Phoenix temperature dip below freezing. The covering also shades them from the hot sun, so tropical house plants are the ones that do best. On hot summer days, we use mistheads which help create a near perfect environment for tropical birds and plants alike.

In planning such an exhibit, it would be wise to avoid plants known to be poisonous. Lists of poisonous plants can be procured at local botanical gardens and universities. Common tropical houseplants which definitely are toxic are philodendrine; dieffenbachia; and poinsettia, *Euphorbia pulcherrima*.

Plants that the Phoenix Zoo has had the most success with and are safe to birds are: weeping fig, *Ficus benjamina*; fiddle leaf fig, *Ficus lyrata*; spider plant, *Chlorophytum comosum*; swedish ivy, *Plectranthus oertendablii*; vinca; maidenhair fern, *Asparagus sprengeri*; and asparagus fern, *Asparagus setaceus*.

When introducing a plant to your aviary, it is best to supply the birds with alternate chewing forms such as eucalyptus and carob tree branches. The birds will probably chew on the new plant a little at first just to test it. Some birds are bad chewers and will destroy anything. We have found young birds and hand-

raised or tame birds to be the worst offenders. It is best to leave the plant in its original pot for the first few days to see if the birds are going to ignore it. If they do, you can plant it permanently.

The outsides of cages offer much more flexibility for planting, as the birds cannot destroy the plants. Plants that the birds enjoy chewing and eating can be planted on the outside so that some sections of the plant will grow into the cages. Here again you must make sure that you do not use poisonous plants. Good outside plants which grow in Phoenix and which birds enjoy eating parts of are: pyranantha (berries and buds); grape vines (fruit and leaves); hibiscus (buds); portulaca (buds); Arabian jasmine, *Jasmine sambac* (buds); canna (all parts including roots); banana trees, *Musa paradisiaca* (leaves); nastur-

tium, *Tropaeolum majus* (all parts); Cassia (buds and flowers); roses (buds, especially *Rosa banksiae*); butterfly bush, *Buddleia alternifolia* and *Buddleia davidii* (buds); *Callistemon citrinus* and *Callistemon viminalis* (buds and brushes); impatiens (buds); bougainvillea (buds and flowers); alyssum (buds); *Justicia ghiesbegtiana* (buds); edible fruit trees, especially pomegranate (buds, fruit, and bark); and most all herbs. Though they are unwanted weeds, most birds relish dandelion and chickweed.

If all goes well, not only will you have a lovelier, more natural looking enclosures; but you will be supplying your birds with added shade, shelter, humidity, and privacy. In addition, many plants supply a food source and attract insects which many birds enjoy eating. ●

Who says it can't be done? The Phoenix Zoo has these hyacinth macaws displayed in a well planted aviary that enhances the birds' beauty and happiness.



Photo by Margaret Spreckels