Costus igneus Spiral Flag, Fiery Costus

Introduction

The large, smooth, dark green leaves of this tropical evergreen have light purple undersides and are spirally arranged around stems, forming attractive, arching clumps arising from underground rootstocks (Fig. 1). Plants reach to about two feet tall, with the tallest stems falling over and lying on the ground. Beautiful, 1.5-inch diameter, orange flowers are produced in the warm months, appearing on cone-like heads at the tips of branches. They are especially showy and will stimulate compliments from visitors to your garden.

General Information

Scientific name: Costus igneus

Pronunciation: KOS-tus IG-nee-us

Common name(s): Spiral-Flag, Fiery Costus

Family: Costaceae

Plant type: perennial

USDA hardiness zones: 9B through 11 (Fig. 2)

Figure 1. Spiral-Flag.

Planting month for zone 9: year round

Planting month for zone 10 and 11: year round

Origin: not native to North America

Uses: specimen; container or above-ground planter; mass planting; cascading down a wall; accent

Availability: grown in small quantities by a small number of nurseries


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Figure 2. Shaded area represents potential planting range.

**Description**

*Height:* 2 to 4 feet  
*Spread:* 2 to 4 feet  
*Plant habit:* upright; spreading  
*Plant density:* open  
*Growth rate:* moderate  
*Texture:* coarse  

**Foliage**

*Leaf arrangement:* alternate  
*Leaf type:* simple  
*Leaf margin:* entire  
*Leaf shape:* oblone  
*Leaf venation:* parallel  
*Leaf type and persistence:* evergreen  
*Leaf blade length:* 4 to 8 inches  
*Leaf color:* green  
*Fall color:* no fall color change  
*Fall characteristic:* not showy  

**Flower**

*Flower color:* orange  
*Flower characteristic:* summer flowering; fall flowering  

**Fruit**

*Fruit shape:* unknown  
*Fruit length:* less than .5 inch  
*Fruit cover:* dry or hard  
*Fruit color:* green  
*Fruit characteristic:* inconspicuous and not showy  

**Trunk and Branches**

*Trunk/bark/branches:* typically multi-trunked or clumping stems  

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**Current year stem/twig color:** green

**Current year stem/twig thickness:** very thick

**Culture**

**Light requirement:** plant grows in part shade/part sun

**Soil tolerances:** occasionally wet; slightly alkaline; clay; sand; acidic; loam

**Drought tolerance:** moderate

**Soil salt tolerances:** poor

**Plant spacing:** 18 to 24 inches

**Other**

**Roots:** usually not a problem

**Winter interest:** plant has winter interest due to unusual form, nice persistent fruits, showy winter trunk, or winter flowers

**Outstanding plant:** plant has outstanding ornamental features and could be planted more

**Invasive potential:** not known to be invasive

**Pest resistance:** long-term health usually not affected by pests

**Use and Management**

Growing in either full sun or partial shade, Spiral Flag needs fertile soil and ample moisture, and is often planted near water. It makes a nice accent plant in a shrub border, where the orange flowers will contrast the greens of the shrub border. Planted on two to three foot centers, it acts as a tall ground cover and can brighten a partially shaded location.

Propagation is by division of the clumps, cuttings, or by separating the offsets or plantlets that form below the flower heads.

Mites and nematodes can be a problem, especially on light, sandy soil.

**Pests and Diseases**

No diseases are of major concern.