

Castilleja coccinea (Scarlet Indian Paintbrush)

Botanical Bytes by Bruner

By Gregory Bruner

Foliage Height: 10-12"
Foliage Width: 10-12"
Flower Height: 12-18"
Foliage Color: Green
Flower Color: Orange
USDA Hardiness: 4-8
Moisture: Average
Light: Full Sun – Part Sun



Castilleja coccinea is a native of the entire eastern half of the United States, even reaching up north into Canada. The plants are an extremely rare gem to find in the wild here in South Carolina and actually are found only in two locations within the state. So to find the plant pictured above at Wildcat Falls in the upstate of South Carolina was a wonderful and treasured surprise.

The name is derived from the name of 19th Century Botany Instructor Domingo Castillejo of Cadiz, Spain. *Coccinea* is a Latin word meaning scarlet or deep red.

Indian Paintbrush can be found in a wide range of locations but prefers wet meadows, open woods, and undisturbed prairies. These gems were growing among the rocks surrounding Wildcat Falls. Even at a distance, the bright orange flowers drew my attention. The seclusion and steep climb to reach the falls is all the protection these hidden glowing jewels needed from most casual hikers, but stubborn plant hunters are sometimes richly rewarded.

There is discussion whether this plant is an annual, bi-annual, or perennial. *Castilleja coccinea* is actually semi-parasitic. It will thrive only if particular native host plants are nearby. The roots of the Indian Paintbrush actually will attach to the roots of its neighbors. This allows it to draw some of its water and nutrient needs from its neighbors. This particular characteristic makes it almost impossible to transplant to a new location once established.

The orange “flowers” are actually leaves, just like the bracts of a poinsettia. The true flowers are small greenish/yellow and almost inconspicuous when compared to the blazing orange tips of the leaves, which look like they have been dipped in bright paint. The flowers may be small, but the orange bracts still will attract hummingbirds if they are nearby.

The legend of the Indian Paintbrush is a simple tale of a native American artist who had just finished painting a particularly beautiful sunset. As he put away his tools, he dropped some of his paint brushes. These incredible plants sprouted from the ground where the brushes landed.

Castilleja coccinea may never be able to paint my yard the beautiful oranges and scarlets of a perfect sunset, but it has left a lifetime mark in my memory.