

Attempts to have a beautiful garden can be hampered by ever-unpredictable weather patterns. Occasionally summers will deliver drought and other times a deluge of water is provided. With such variability, it can be difficult to choose plants that will thrive regardless of the conditions. There are however plants that can do just that, and these are the selections best made for a low-maintenance and beautiful garden.

The perennial *Kniphofia* (ni-FOH-fee-a), also known as Torch Lily and Red Hot Poker is one such adaptable plant. The plant gains its scientific name from the German Physician Johannes Hieronymus Kniphof, and its common names from the appearance of the flower heads of the plants, which are torch shaped and colored in reds, oranges and yellows.

*Kniphofia* is a native of continental Africa, with most species originating in South Africa. Just three species occur naturally outside of continental Africa, two in Madagascar and one in Yemen. *Kniphofia* made its debut outside of African in 1707 when it was first introduced to England.

When first grown commercially in England, the hardiness of *Kniphofia* was yet determined, and its origins caused suspicion about its potential to withstand cold. Consequently, the plants were regarded as a greenhouse or indoor plant in England until the early to mid-1800s. By this time the plant had been left outdoors where its hardiness was discovered, making it a welcome addition to perennial borders. Different species of *Kniphofia* have since been identified as hardy in USDA plant hardiness zones 6 through 10.

While considered cold hardy, they are not all reliably so. Most species of the plant are also evergreen. To ensure cold-hardiness, it is best to take advantage of *Kniphofia's* evergreen foliage. The plants form large, arching clumps of thick, succulent-looking leaves that provide year-round interest in the garden, and also provide protection for the plant throughout the winter. Fold foliage over and tie in order to protect the crown from excessive moisture and cold during the winter months. In the spring, loosen ties and prune away any bruised or browned foliage.

*Kniphofia's* bloom time is species dependent, although most commonly, they bloom in early to mid-spring. With a bit of planning, varieties can be chosen to provide bloom spring through fall. The torch-like blooms of *Kniphofia* add color to any sunny garden setting, as well as to cut flower arrangements. Additionally, their colors draw nectar feeding birds and insects such as hummingbirds and butterflies to gardens. To extend the bloom time and enjoyment of the *Kniphofia* bloom, it is important to deadhead all spent blossoms.

While its blooms and foliage are beautiful, perhaps the most attractive characteristic of *Kniphofia* is its low-maintenance nature. These plants show a great deal of drought and heat tolerance, as they are able to store water in their

thick roots. In addition to drought tolerance, *Kniphofia* can endure through periods of being inundated with water during the summer, provided there is good drainage in order to prevent root rot.

Another great low-maintenance trait is that they seldom require division. The plants are clump forming and only need to be divided and transplanted if the flowers begin to show signs of deterioration. Actually, *Kniphofia* does better when left alone, as they resent being disturbed and may show their resentment by not flowering again for one to three years after being divided.

Perhaps one of the best traits of *Kniphofia* is that deer, rabbits and other four-legged animal pests rarely, if ever bother them.

For those gardeners struggling to grow beautiful perennials in the presence of ever changing precipitation rates, and wanting minimal maintenance responsibilities, *Kniphofia* should not be overlooked.