



JOSH McCULLOUGH

# Cuphea Fever

With intriguing common names like bat-face plant, cigar flower, firecracker plant, and Mexican heather, these colorful tender perennials turn the heat up in any garden.

BY CALEB MELCHIOR

**R**EAD ANY description of the genus *Cuphea* and you can start counting off the prerequisites for any gardener's dream-plant list. Easy to grow—check. Bears brightly colored flowers—check. Blooms over long periods of time—check. Thrives in heat and humidity—check. Attracts hummingbirds—check. Easy to propagate—check. Suitable for garden beds or containers—check. It's an impressive list of attributes.

Of course, no plant genus is perfect. Most *Cuphea* species are native to subtropical or tropical regions, so they are categorized as tender perennials and few overwinter outdoors except in nearly frost free areas such as southern California, the Florida Keys, and Hawaii. They are generally considered hardy in USDA Zones 10–12 and heat tolerant in AHS Heat Zones 12–1. But whether you treat them as annuals and replace them each year, or grow them in containers that can be stashed in a warm place for the winter, you will find them to be worthy additions to your garden.

## A BIT ABOUT THE GENUS

The genus *Cuphea* comprises some 250 to 300 species of evergreen shrubs, herbaceous perennials, and annuals native primarily to Mexico and Central America. A handful of non-ornamental species are native to the continental United States, including blue waxweed (*Cuphea viscosissima*), which is found over much of the eastern U.S.

The genus is a member of the loosestrife family (Lythraceae), along with crape myrtles (*Lagerstroemia* spp.) and pomegranates (*Punica granatum*). Only six or seven species are readily cultivated

in North America, but many selections and hybrids have been introduced.

Cuphea flowers come in two primary forms that botanists and gardeners have dubbed “cigar” and “bat-face.” These flower forms have become a handy way to differentiate the ornamental species.



**Opposite:** Black-eyed cuphea's flowers are bright pink to orange with a yellow tip; two tiny dark-colored petals resemble whimsical eyes. **Above:** Caribbean Sunset™ is a selection of black-eyed cuphea with an orange tube and maroon to purple eyes.

## CIGAR TYPES

Cigar-type flowers are comprised of long narrow calyx tubes—technically known as hypanthia—that flare slightly wider at the open end. The flared tip often is a contrasting color, which helps pollinators find the

opening (and creates the fanciful resemblance to a lighted cigar that spawned the common name). Cigar flower or firecracker plant (*C. ignea*), native to Mexico, is the most commonly grown cigar-type cuphea, growing about a foot tall and wide with lance-shaped leaves. Its individual flower tubes are burnt orange in color, with bands of white and dark purple at the tip.

The Mexican giant cigar plant (*C. micropetala*), growing taller and more upright than *C. ignea*, also has tubular flowers, but they're more dramatically flared at the tips. Its leaves are broader and oblong in shape. This may be the hardiest of the cupheas, overwintering in USDA Zone 7 or 8. It blooms from late summer into fall.

Black-eyed cuphea (*C. cyanea*), another Mexican native, has incandescent pink and yellow flowers with two small, dark-colored “eyes” at the tip. It grows one to two feet tall.

## BAT-FACE TYPES

In bat-face types, two to six petals form at the ends of the flower tube. The petals vary in size and shape in relation to the flower's corolla, creating flowers with highly variable looks.

Bat-face cuphea (*C. llavea*) has only two reflexed petals, barely half as long as the flower tube. The two flares give the appearance of little pointed wings, thus the name. In some of the hybrids, such as Flamenco Samba™, six flares open to form a flower as wide as it is deep.

In Mexican or false heather (*C. byssopifolia*), the corolla is green and disappears into the foliage, while the six flared petals give the tiny white or pale purple flowers a more conventional, starlike appearance. Some-

times called elfin herb, Mexican heather is also distinguished by its neat, compact stature and dainty, glossy green leaves. It is sometimes employed as an edging plant along paths or borders.

Cupheas hybridize easily and many selections now being offered are probably hybrids between two or more species. Crosses between bat-face cuphea and a species with the unlovable name creeping waxweed (*C. procumbens*) may be listed under *C. xpurpurea*.

## REGIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS

I talked to tropical plant experts and experienced gardeners around the country to find out which species and selections they recommend in their regions.

■ **MIDWEST** Chris Kelley has been growing tropicals for over 20 years at Cottage Garden, her nursery in Alton, Illinois. She regularly travels throughout the country to find tropicals that will thrive in the heat, humidity, and drought of midwestern summers so, not surprisingly, cigar flower is one of her standards. “*Cuphea ignea* and its hybrids are probably the best of the genus for our lower Midwest climate,” she says, citing their attractive, mildew-resistant foliage.

The standard species form of cigar flower is a fiery burnt orange, but Kelley’s favorite selections have flowers in softer shades. ‘Ballistic’, a vibrant selection produced from a cross with a bat-face cuphea, “is the deepest purple of any *Cuphea ignea* I have grown,” Kelley says, “The end of the corolla is dipped in white, adding a showy bicolor effect.” ‘Ballistic’ is a very compact hybrid “perfect for container, basket, or window box use,” says Kelley. Its heavy flowering makes it an excellent plant for highly visible situations.

Kelley also admires ‘Starfire Pink’, another hybrid with bat-face characteristics, distinguished by dusty rose corollas and bright lavender flares. She describes it as “the best cuphea for a pastel effect.”

In addition to cigar flower and its hybrids, Kelley’s containers are home to many other outstanding cupheas. ‘Purple Passion’ is a large (three- to five-foot high and wide), sprawling hybrid with violet bat-face flowers. “I am in love with this plant,” she says. The small purple flowers are held all along the stems, giving the plant a diffuse,



Top: One of four current selections in the hybrid Flamenco series, Flamenco Samba™ bears lipstick red petals with purple and white highlights. Above: The glossy green foliage, starlike flowers, and tidy, shrublike habit of Mexican heather make it useful as an edging plant in a sunny bed or border.



'David Verity', shown here in a bed with ageratum and yarrow, is a vigorous cigar-type selection with reddish-orange and yellow flowers.

almost twinkling appearance. "It is a wonderful hardy annual that self-sows," Kelley says. She hastens to add that it's not invasive in her Illinois garden, "It pops up unexpectedly, providing a touch of purple."

■ **MID-ATLANTIC** Cupheas may get a slower start during the cooler springs the East Coast experiences, but it doesn't take them long to catch up once the weather warms. At Chanticleer gardens in Wayne, Pennsylvania, horticulturist Dan Benarcik and his colleagues use cupheas and other unusual plants in striking color combinations to create magical effects in containers and borders.

'David Verity', a red-orange cigar-type hybrid, "is an absolute workhorse for us here in the Delaware Valley," says Benarcik. "The heat really turns it up." It grows quickly to three to four feet tall. "Some people are scared of orange," Benarcik says, "But it's my happy place." He likes to combine the sizzling orange flowers with contrasting purples such as the foliage of 'Princess Caroline' fountain grass (*Pennisetum* sp.).

For the less audacious, Benarcik suggests pairing 'David Verity' with analogous shades

of orange and brown, as found in *Coleus* 'Rustic Orange' and *Acalypha* 'Inferno'.

Benarcik also enjoys the diminutive pleasures of Flamenco Samba™, one of the selections in the Flamenco series. A hybrid of *C. llavea* 'Tiny Mice' and *C. procumbens*, Samba has one-inch flowers with dark purple tubes and red petals. "Unlike 'David Verity', Samba is more of an edging and detail plant, spilling or at least growing laterally," Benarcik says. "I use it as a detail or to tuck into a container. It has that wonderful little purple touch to it, tying disparate elements together."

■ **SOUTHEAST** Gardeners in the southern United States are particularly fond of cupheas because these tenacious plants hold the garden together through the misery of steamy July days and muggy August nights. Pam Baggett's Singing Springs Nursery in the Piedmont region of North Carolina was once a magnet for tropiholics throughout the country. Although Baggett no longer operates the nursery, she continues to cherish a wide variety of cupheas in her own garden.

For all-around performance, Baggett's go-to species is cigar flower. "They're in bloom when you buy them and they're still in bloom at frost," she says, "They just don't stop."

Baggett also puts in a plug for Mexican giant cigar plant, which she says is reliably perennial in USDA Zone 7. Unlike most other cupheas, which are compact plants with fairly continuous flowering through the summer, Mexican giant cigar plant erupts with candy-corn colored cigar flowers in late autumn. "I think it looks good even out of bloom, so that makes it worth it to me," she says. "And, of course, there's the really nice orange flowers in the fall."

*Cuphea glutinosa*, native to Mexico but naturalized in a few sites in Louisiana and Texas, is one of the tiniest species on Baggett's list. Growing only eight inches to a foot tall, the plants have wiry stems that sprawl to create a low, mounded habit up to 18 inches wide. Like Mexican heather, *C. glutinosa* has flowers in which the flares are so enlarged, they resemble little stars. Baggett describes the flower color as "a nice little gentle soft purple with a red-violet streak."



Bat-face cupheas such as ‘Tiny Mice’ are excellent choices for containers and hanging baskets.

For a dramatic edging plant, Baggett recommends Riverdene Gold™ (‘Aurea’), a chartreuse-leaved form of Mexican heather that has hot pink flowers.

A little farther south, in Athens, Georgia, Meg Green has managed the test gardens at the University of Georgia in Athens for over 25 years. She recommends ‘Totally Tempted’, a bat-face variety that has bright red flares at the end of a purple corolla. She cites its heavy flowering and bright colors as the reason for her devotion.

■ **SOUTHWEST** In the Southwest, gardeners often grow cupheas as a substitute for less vigorous shade plants. Mary Irish, author of numerous books on Southwest gardening, appreciates their heavy and prolific flowering despite the heat. She gardened near Phoenix, Arizona, for 25 years before moving to Castroville, Texas, not far from San Antonio, in 2012.

Irish says both bat-face cupheas and cigar flowers are generally reliable perennials throughout the lower Southwest. With its showy scarlet and purple flowers, bat-face cuphea is her personal favorite. “I’d recom-

mend using it in a bed where a lot of color is needed, perhaps near the house, where you’ll see it all the time,” she says, “You don’t want to waste all of those flowers.”

Cigar flower is also beloved by southwestern gardeners, particularly the hybrid ‘Twinkle Pink’, a bat-face cross that has hot pink corollas and tiny white flares, each centrally striped pink.

### CARE AND PROPAGATION

Cupheas will thrive in full sun in most North American gardens, but they may do better in part or dappled shade in very warm regions. Grow cupheas in fertile, moist, organic-rich soils. They do tend to bloom more prolifically if fertilized regularly, so add compost tea or a balanced fertilizer every couple of weeks during active growth. To encourage bushy plants, pinch off the tips early in the summer to stimulate branching.

Cupheas are easy to propagate from seeds and cuttings. Sow seeds, uncovered, in late winter, about six weeks before the last frost date for your region. Provide bottom heat (70 to 75 degrees Fahrenheit) and a grow light. Seeds can be trans-

## Sources

**Annie’s Annuals & Perennials**, Richmond, CA. (888) 266-4370. [www.anniesannuals.com](http://www.anniesannuals.com).

**Avant Gardens**, North Dartmouth, MA. (508) 998-8819. [www.avantgardensne.com](http://www.avantgardensne.com).

**Davidson Greenhouse & Nursery**, Crawfordsville, IN. (765) 364-0556. [www.davidsongreenhouse.com](http://www.davidsongreenhouse.com).

**Goodwin Creek Gardens**, Williams, OR. (541) 846-7357. [www.goodwincreekgardens.com](http://www.goodwincreekgardens.com).

**Plant Delights Nursery**, Raleigh, NC. (919) 772-4794. [www.plantdelights.com](http://www.plantdelights.com).

## Resources

**Armitage’s Manual of Annuals, Biennials and Half-Hardy Perennials** by Allan Armitage. Timber Press, Portland, OR, 2001.

**Hummingbird Gardens: Turning Your Yard into Hummingbird Heaven** by Stephen Kress. Brooklyn Botanic Gardens, Brooklyn, NY, 2007.

planted into individual containers once their true leaves form. They sometimes self-seed, so you can also pot up seedlings from the garden. According to Baggett, cupheas tend to hybridize easily, so seed-grown forms may yield interesting variations in flower color and shape.

Cuttings can be taken any time and rooted in sand or a soilless potting mix that is kept evenly moist. Transplant them into containers once roots have formed and keep them in a cool, sunny location over winter.

### SO MUCH TO OFFER

No matter where you live, it’s well worth growing cupheas. They will amaze you with their heat tolerance, long bloom times, and vibrant colors. Plant them near a porch or patio—they do well in both conventional containers and hanging baskets—then sit back and enjoy the hummingbirds and other pollinators that are drawn to the flowers all summer long.

*Caleb Melchior is a garden writer based in Perryville, Missouri.*