

Tree Profile: *Callistemon - Bottlebrush*

General Information: The Australian native *Callistemon* are mainly found up and down the east coast of Australia, and are commonly known as Bottlebrush because of their cylindrical brush-like flowers. They are much admired for their brilliant flowers which generally form in spring, but can spot-flower at other times. They are grown extensively in gardens and public areas. The plants are all woody shrubs which range in size from 0.5m to 4m tall. They often grow in damp or wet conditions such as along creek beds or in areas which are prone to floods. They grow in a wide range of soils provided that they are not too alkaline, but good drainage is essential for pot culture. The bark varies between species, and can be fibrous, rough, hard, though finely textured, or it can be papery with soft changes of colour. Many *Callistemon*s have beautifully coloured new leaves. These vary from pale pink through to dark rusty greens. Though not as spectacular as the flowers, these colours add greatly to the visual enjoyment of seeing these plants grow through the seasons.

Position: Full sun, all year around for optimum growth and flower production.

Watering: Although drought tolerant in the wild, they must be well-watered in pot culture. Check daily and water if the pot is drying out.

Feeding: Like all members of the myrtle family (Myrtaceae or Eucalypt family), *Callistemon*s will thrive on nitrogen-rich fertiliser. Care needs to be taken not to overdo the nitrogen, as this encourages the production of lush leaves at the expense of good flowering! Two applications of blood and bone or similar, one in autumn and another in late winter is recommended for flower production, although frequent applications of liquid fertilizer such as Powerfeed or Charlie Carp will maximize healthy foliar growth. Do not fertilise when flowering, as this reduces the flowering duration.

Repotting: As *Callistemon*s are quite vigorous growers, roots will quickly fill a pot. Check drainage in the pot, and if water is slow to be absorbed, repotting should be scheduled! Once per year or every second or third year will probably be required. Wait until the weather starts warming up and new growth is starting before repotting, generally from mid-Spring onwards.

Pruning and Wiring: For general shaping, prune them hard just after flowering finishes. Prune behind the flower brushes. If you leave a few green leaves below your cut, new growth will come from the axils of those leaves. Do not prune after March/April, or you will lose flower buds which appear on new growth. Pinching tips for ramification is permissible. Wire at any time when needed, but best after flowering and heavy pruning when the structure can be more easily seen.

Propagation: Can be grown easily from seed, however *Callistemon*s hybridise easily so the characteristics of the resultant seedlings may vary from the parent tree. Collect the seed pods when mature and store in a container or bag in a warm, dry place. When left on the tree, the seedpods can take up to trees years to release the seed, so best to collect the oldest, unopened seed pods. Seeds will be released into the container from the pods in anything from a few weeks to a year, so be patient! Sow seed in spring. Alternatively, take semi-hardwood cuttings in summer – these will grow true to the parent plant.

Pests: Scale, and the attendant black fungus, can sometimes be a problem. Remove them with fingernails if isolated, or control with white oil if extensive. *Callistemon* are also prone to attack from a variety of caterpillars, the worst type comprise multiple large black caterpillars from the same egg laying which because of their numbers will rapidly defoliate a bonsai tree. Keep a close eye on your trees! Pick them off with tweezers if found. Other smaller caterpillars may also be found, but usually in smaller numbers and so do less damage. Keep an eye out for eaten leaves, and then search for the caterpillar culprit!

Styles: Mainly grown in the upright styles. Naturally growing specimens vary from multistemmed shrubs to erect small trees with weeping branches, so best to try to reflect what is seen on nature.

Varieties: There are about 50 species of *Callistemon*, many of which would not have been tried as bonsai but which would probably succeed. Some of the more readily available types are:

Callistemon sieberi – native to our local Yarra Valley area, pale yellow flowers in summer.

Callistemon viminalis – The Weeping Bottlebrush, with bright red flower spikes.

Callistemon citrinus – The Crimson Bottlebrush, bright red flower spikes in summer and autumn.

Callistemon salignus – the Willow Bottlebrush – attractive narrow foliage and white papery bark, flowers are generally white or greenish, but pink, red and mauve forms can be found.

Callistemon cultivars – generally from *viminalis* or *citrinus* as one parent, including-

Captain Cook – one of the smaller cultivars with bright red flower spikes and small narrow leaves.

Little John – a dwarf cultivar with masses of flowers and blue-green foliage

Kings Park Special – very hardy, will generally bud back from old wood more readily than other cultivars. Bright red flower spikes and attractive furrowed bark.

Dawson River Weeper – large cultivar with a more pronounced weeping habit. Bright red flower spikes.



Pictures courtesy of AusBonsai, multiple contributors.