

## Tree Profile: *Melaleuca*

**General Information:** *Melaleuca* is a genus of plants in the myrtle family Myrtaceae. There are well over 200 recognised species, most of which are endemic to Australia. The species are shrubs and trees growing (depending on species) to 2–30 m (6.6–98 ft) tall, often with flaky, exfoliating bark.

The leaves are evergreen, alternately arranged, ovate to lanceolate, 1–25 cm (0.39–9.8 in) long and 0.5–7 cm (0.20–2.8 in) broad, with an entire margin, dark green to grey-green in colour.

The flowers are produced in dense clusters along the stems, each flower with fine small petals and a tight bundle of stamens; flower colour varies from white to pink, red, pale yellow or greenish, and there is even a mauve variety. The fruit is a small capsule containing numerous minute seeds.

*Melaleuca* is closely related to the genus *Callistemon*, the main difference between the two is that the stamens are generally free in *Callistemon* but grouped into bundles in *Melaleuca*.

In the wild, *Melaleuca* plants are generally found in open forest, woodland or shrubland, particularly along watercourses and the edges of swamps.

The best-accepted common name for *Melaleuca* is simply melaleuca; however most of the larger species are also known as tea tree, and the smaller types as honey myrtles, while those species in which the bark is shed in flat, flexible sheets are referred to as paperbarks.

**Lighting:** Place outside in full sun.

**Temperature:** Will tolerate most temperatures in Melbourne.

**Watering:** Like most natives, *Melaleuca* will take up as much water as it can, although it will tolerate periods of dryness. For maximum growth, thereby giving many styling options for bonsai, water well particularly during the growing season, when the use of water trays under the pot can be advantageous.

**Feeding:** Fertilise heavily during the growing season to promote vigorous growth. Any type of fertiliser is satisfactory, although there are some reports that using a fertiliser developed for acid loving plants such as azaleas can be advantageous.

**Pruning and Wiring:** Wire for shape when young or the branches are small, as thicker growth may be brittle. Watch the wire carefully and remove when starting to bite in – branches can thicken very quickly. Most melaleuca will shoot from old wood. It is possible to cut back to bare wood and expect *Melaleuca* to shoot profusely on most species, however recognize that this is always a risk – it is safer to cut back to green leaves only. Prune branches after flowering, and finger pinch to promote compact growth and to form pads where required.

**Propagation:** *Melaleuca* can be grown from both seed and from cuttings. Seeds require no treatment before sowing. After collecting seed capsules, they can be placed into a non-airtight container for 1-2 years. After this time, shake gently and the very fine seed will be dislodged. Sow thinly. Germination takes place in approximately 14 days. It can also be grown from fresh semi hard wood cuttings taken in December to March. Remove excess leaves and trim few remaining leaves from the cutting. Use a rooting hormone and put in a pot containing propagation mix. The cutting takes 6-7 weeks before roots form.

**Repotting:** Repot during the warmer months only, generally from November through to March. In general, reduce the foliage somewhat first, water the tree, then repot 2 hours later and root prune as required. Some varieties may be more tender than others, so be cautious until you are familiar with your tree's response.

**Pests and Diseases:** *Melaleuca* is subject to Myrtle Rust - symptoms include red and purple discolouration on leaves, with the fruiting bodies being quite distinct bright yellow pustules on the new growth, causing distortion, then death of the foliage. Separate the tree from other stock, treat with systemic fungicide like Mancozeb. Many forms of caterpillar like *Melaleuca*, especially the webbing caterpillar. Pick off the bugs, then treat with insecticide, preferably systemic for best effect.

**Species Suitable for Bonsai:** Almost all varieties may be used, following are some of the more commonly-mentioned.

*Melaleuca linarifolia* – “Snow in Summer”, paper bark, cream flowers.

*Melaleuca ericifolia* – cream flowers in spring.

*Melaleuca raphiophylla* – pure white paper bark, needle-like pendulous foliage, cream flowers.

*Melaleuca styphelioides* – attractive trunk, cream, flower brushes.

*Melaleuca nesophila* – mauve-pink with gold tips.



*Melaleuca linarifolia*  
(Photo courtesy sydneycitybonsai.org.au)



*Melaleuca raphiophylla*  
(Photo courtesy pup at ausbonsai)



*Melaleuca nesophila*  
(Photo courtesy pup at ausbonsai)