

Tree Profile: Firethorn - *Pyracantha*

General information: Firethorn is a large, evergreen shrub with glossy dark green oval leaves and small white flowers in summer, but it's cherished for its spectacular autumn and winter display of yellow, orange or scarlet berries on spreading, spiny stems and ability to withstand dry and droughty conditions. Firethorn typically grows into a tangled mound up to 3 m by 3.5 m wide; it can be used to make hedges for home security.

Pyracantha is in the Rosaceae family and is native to an area ranging from southwest Europe to South East Asia. It is considered to be a weed in Victoria, being easily spread by ingestion of the berries by birds and later dispersal of the seeds. The berries are safe for human consumption, but are insipid and the seeds are mildly poisonous.

Lighting and Temperature: Full sun or partial shade throughout the year but will need protection from frosts or freezing winds. Needs well ventilated position to help fight fungal diseases.

Watering: Daily throughout the growing season. Keep moist at all times. A very thirsty species. Never ever let the soil dry out completely. May need to be placed in a water tray on very hot or windy days.

Feeding: Weekly from early spring until flowering, then once fruit has developed every two weeks until mid-autumn. Feed for flower and fruit production, that is, use a fertilizer high in phosphorus and potassium and low in nitrogen. Don't skimp on potash!

Pruning and wiring: Shorten new shoots on established branches in late spring to two sets of leaves and prune older wood in either early spring or late summer. Remove large leaves throughout the growing season.

Rest plant every third year by removing flowers as they form. Constant flowering and fruiting can result in a tree that is over stressed.

Take care when wiring, as old woody branches are brittle.

Propagation: From seed sown in autumn. Softwood cuttings in summer, use heel cuttings for better results. Air layering may be done in spring and early summer. Can take a long to form roots!

Repotting: Every two to three years in early spring with 80% good quality potting mix and 20% coarse sand or equivalent material. The soil should be moisture retentive. Position the roots during repotting!

Pests and diseases: Spiders like to squat on these and common harmful pests include fireblight, scale, miners, aphids, and caterpillars: organic pest oil works well as a broad spectrum.

Styles: Informal Upright, Slanting, Cascade, Semi-cascade, Literati, Group planting and Saikei.

Some species suitable for bonsai:

P. angustifolia, (orange-red fruit), is the most common, but

P. coccinea, (red fruit), is better suited for frost susceptible areas.

P. crenulata, (the evergreen variety, orange-red fruit), is also very common.

And many other available varieties.

