

Callistemon citrinus**Myrtaceae****Australia, New Zealand**

COMMON NAMES: English: Scarlet bottlebrush, Lemon bottlebrush.

DESCRIPTION: A small evergreen tree, to 6 m, with drooping foliage. **BARK:** Grey, smooth, furrowed with age.

LEAVES: Narrow, tough, grey-green to 8 cm, lemon-scented when crushed, young leaves pink-green. **FLOWERS:** Vivid crimson bottlebrush-like **cylindrical spikes**, due to a mass of long red stamens, nectar attracting birds and bees. Leafy shoots continue to grow beyond the flower 'brush'. **FRUIT:** Small woody capsules, persisting for many months, often becoming embedded in the thickening branch.

ECOLOGY: A remarkably hardy tree, tolerant of a wide range of temperatures, altitudes and soils; even thrives on poorly drained black-cotton soils. Agroclimatic Zones I–IV. Flowers during the rainy season or continuously on humid ground. Bottlebrush seeds continually.

USES: Firewood, charcoal, medicine (bark), bee forage, ornamental, windbreak.

PROPAGATION: Seedlings. Selected clones can be propagated by cuttings from the tips of branches.

SEED: Seeds are tiny. Seed germination is uniform within 2 weeks. Street nurseries in Nairobi germinate *Callistemon* in the following way: Harvest seeds from dry fruits as they split open. Water the seedbed and put the desired quantity of the flour-like seeds in water. Pour this mix on the humid soil. Seeds are lodged on the soil surface as the water soaks in the soil. Cover with a polythene sheet to reduce evaporation and to retain heat. Germination starts after about 6 days. Young plants are easily killed by cold, hence preferably sown in hot months (not June–August).

treatment: Not necessary.

storage: Seed can be stored for long periods.

MANAGEMENT: Fast growing on good sites but almost stagnates at 4–5 m. Prune branches drooping too low. A light pruning after flowering may prevent seed capsules forming and promote more flowering and bushiness.

REMARKS: *C. citrinus* is a very variable species with many cultivars and flower colours—pink, white, mauve and red. Wood is tough. The botanical epithet (*citrinus*) refers to a faint lemon scent emitted by crushed leaves.

Callistemon is an Australian genus with 30 or so species generally grown as ornamentals in urban centres, around homesteads, along streets and in parks. Flowers are nectar rich and attract birds and bees. Many species in this genus are closely related so hybridization is common. Other species include *C. linearis* (narrow-leaved bottlebrush), *C. salignus* (willow bottlebrush) and *C. viminalis* (weeping bottlebrush).

FURTHER READING: ; Dharani, 2002; Fichtl and Adi, 1994; Katende et al., 1995; Mbuya et al., 1994; Noad and Birnie, 1989.

