



Illawarra Flame Tree

Immortalised in song



The Flame tree was brought to popular culture through a song written for Cold Chisel:

**And Oh the flame trees will blind the weary driver
And there's nothing else could set fire to this town.**

It is also proved very popular as an ornamental tree not only in Australia but also around the world. A little known fact is that in the New South Wales local government area of Northern Beaches, the Illawarra Flame Tree is included in a list of trees that are exempt from the need to request Council's consent prior to removal

Indigenous Uses

According to Russell Barrett, Royal Botanic Garden Sydney Botanist, the inner bark was for making string, fishing nets and a food source. The large seeds are rich in protein and taste like peanut. Indigenous Australians ate them either raw or roasted after removing the irritating hairs that surround them in the pod. They are nutritious, containing 18% protein and 25% fat with high levels of zinc and magnesium. They also ate the roots of young trees.

Family: *Malvaceae*

Genus: *Brachychiton*

Botanic name: *Brachychiton acerifolius*

From Greek: *brachys* –short and *chiton* – a tunic, a reference to the coating on the seed; *acerifolius* having foliage like the genus *Acer* (maple)

Also known as: Illawarra Flame tree, flame tree, lacebark tree, kurrajong

Origin: Endemic to tropical and subtropical regions on the east coast of Australia

Habitat: Found in well-developed coastal rainforests – in Cape York Peninsula and north east Queensland the altitudinal range is from sea level to 1,000m but it also grows in drier, more seasonal forests. Closer to Sydney, natural stands can be found at the Minnamurra Rainforest Centre and along the Illawarra Escarpment.

Description: It is a large deciduous tree which forms a pyramidal habit. It may reach 30-35m in height in its natural habitat. The trunk is neatly rounded and green or grey-green in colour, often tapering unbranched to the very tip of the tree.

Leaves have long petioles and measure up to 30cm x 25cm and are glossy green and highly variable in shape – they may be entire and ovate or up to 5-lobed. It is leafless for a period between October and December.

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Flowers are bright red or scarlet in colour, bell-shaped when viewed from the side and star-shaped when viewed end-on, about 25-30mm long x 16-22mm wide, and are produced on large panicles. They have five petals fused at the base and free at the ends. The flowers often cover the whole tree when it is leafless, most commonly flowering during the summer holidays.

The ensuing fruits are a dehiscent pod which is dark brown, leathery, boat-shaped and about 10cm long. They ripen around May to August in Australia, splitting along one side to reveal two rows of yellow seeds numbering 12-26, each around 10 x 5mm and surrounded by a papery aril covered in stiff hairs which are very irritating if touched.



Sources:

- ANPSA.org.au-www.specialitytrees.com
- AustralianGeographic.com.au
- Backyardbuddies.org.au
- Rbgsyd.nsw.gov.au
- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brachychiton_acerifolius

Propagation and cultivation: Propagation from seed is relatively easy without any pre-treatment. The seeds are surrounded in the capsule by irritant hairs and are best collected using gloves. Drought tolerant, flowering may take 5-8 years. Grafting is possible