

October 2025

Plant of the month

Illawarra Flame Tree



Common Name: Illawarra Flame Tree
Scientific Name: *Brachychiton acerifolius* (A.Cunn. ex G.Don) F.Muell.
Family: Malvaceae
Genus: from the Greek *brachys* -short and *chiton* - a tunic, refers to the coating on the seeds.
Species epithet: *acerifolius* – foliage like an *Acer*, the Maple genus.



The flowering of these trees is a spectacular event, both in their natural rainforest habitat and in parks and gardens along the east coast of Australia. Trees are deciduous and bright red bell-shaped flowers cover the tree just before the new foliage is produced. As their common names suggests and the Australian rock classic, “Flame Trees” by Cold Chisel celebrates, the effect of these large red trees in the landscape is unforgettable.

They are one of 30 species in the genus that also includes the charismatic Queensland Bottle tree, *Brachychiton rupestris*.

Flowers are followed by distinctive boat-shaped pods that split open to reveal yellow seeds. Seeds are covered in stiff hairs that are very irritating if touched. Seeds are edible but Aboriginal cultural groups use specific methods to prepare them safely.

Trees are hosts for the larvae of several butterflies including the Pencil-blue, Common Aeroplane and Tailed-emperor butterflies. Although easy to grow in the garden, they are large trees that may reach 35 m.



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Distribution

Southern NSW to far north Queensland.

Native Habitat

Rainforest.

Description

Large deciduous tree to 35 metres with a pyramidal habit. Adult leaves are shallowly or entirely 3-lobed and juvenile leaves often deeply 5-lobed.

Flowers

Flowers are bright red or scarlet in colour, with five petals fused creating a tube that looks bell-shaped when viewed from the side. Flowers are produced in large panicles.

Fruit

A dark brown, leathery, boat-shaped pod that splits along one side to reveal two rows of yellow seeds surrounded by a papery aril, covered in stiff hairs, which are very irritating if touched.

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