



Leaves glow red in morning sun; flower buds forming in early October



View, from 'Eagle Nest', of the eastern half of the 'Grace' plantation planted in November 2009

## *An ideal small tree for the Canberra garden* **Purple-leafed Smokebush (Cotinus 'Grace')** Forest 49: National Arboretum

Text by **Merylyn Condon**, photos Peter Hill

From the family Anacardiaceae with relatives such as the Mango, the Cashew and the Pistachio, comes Purple-leafed Smokebush (Cotinus 'Grace'). I am thrilled that out of the countless trees that could have been chosen, one of my favourite plants rated selection for planting in Forest 49 at the National Arboretum.

It's a garden hybrid between Cotinus coggygria 'Velvet Cloak' from Europe and the single American species, Cotinus obovatus. Most species originate in either Europe or Asia. 'Grace' is relatively new to the plant world. It was developed in the 1970s at Hillier's Nursery in England by Peter Drummer and named after his wife. Its autumn colour is ideal in cold climates and hence it is an ideal choice for Canberra. It requires very little care and is relatively tough, though some irrigation is helpful in prolonged dry periods. It would prefer fairly rich, well-drained soil, but is quite tough and tolerant of differing soil conditions. It could be used as an informal hedge if one had the space, but as a single feature plant, it is superb.

My single specimen grows as a small tree, positioned at the bottom of my garden at the rear of smaller plantings, and stretching up over my back fence. It provides year-round value in my garden, but if you want only autumn colour, you need look no further. When at the height of its autumn colour, anyone walking or driving along Drake Brockman Drive can enjoy a wonderful sight, as can I from the top end of my garden - it's a knock-out!

'Grace' is strikingly beautiful with its wine-red young foliage, the leaves maturing to purple and in autumn, vibrant orange, red and yellow tones. Like all smoke bushes, its flowers have a hazy, smoky appearance above the foliage of the plant, but in actual fact they are tiny yellow panicles covered with fine white hairs in late spring to early summer. The plant is deciduous and best planted in full sun to maximize its rich colour.

Fertiliser: I feed my tree with blood and bone in spring

(Yates now offer Blood and Bone Professional which includes Potash). I add a good layer of mulch in summer to help retain soil moisture and restrict weed growth.

Pruning: 'Grace's annual growth as a young plant is vigorous, approximately a metre or so per year, and in some positions she is inclined to become rangy, as in my garden. Some pruning is needed though I don't prune her regularly, tending just to lop her now and then as I feel the need. At the Arboretum, I expect her growth may be more compact because of the exposed planting. Some cotinus growers prefer to keep their cotinus compact and prune hard every winter, preferring to shorten main stems to around a metre (this applies to most cotinus species and cultivars). Don't be frightened to let loose with the secateurs if you prefer your cotinus as a shrub rather than a small tree as hard pruning will certainly not hurt 'Grace' and she will grow back with larger leaves and good colour. She will be just as beautiful whether a compact shrub or a small tree.

Propagation: Softwood cuttings can be taken in summer. Choose your cuttings by trying to bend the wood. If it still bends, it's not ready, but if it snaps with a nice cracking sound and that doesn't require too much effort, then those cuttings will be just right. Cuttings should be 10-15cm long, making a cut just below a leaf node. Remove the lower leaves, and scratch the stem with your secateurs or budding knife and then cover the wounded/cut area with rooting hormone. Place cuttings into a pot filled with propagation sand as this will assist in preventing your cuttings from rotting. A heated bed is a good idea, but if you don't have one, then you can simply fashion a cover using bamboo stakes or coat-hanger wire, either of which can be covered with plastic. Keep the cuttings moist but well-drained in a protected area, checking regularly for roots appearing from the drainage holes. When that happens, it's time to transfer your new plants to individual pots for growing on.