



C. 'Rowena' plants

A Callistemon for your Garden?

By Ben Walcott

Callistemons, or bottle brushes, are one of the most iconic Australian native plants. They are widely grown throughout the world as ornamental plants in gardens and along streets. This group of plants, which also includes the Melaleucas, comes in a variety of sizes and growth habits to suit almost any niche in a Canberra garden.

Plants in this group like some water and do well in our clay soils. Once established they seem to be quite drought hardy. They often bloom twice per year, once in the spring and then again in the autumn. The autumn flowering tends to be longer than in the spring because the cooler weather makes the blooms last longer. They are plants that are very attractive to bees and nectar feeding birds such as spinebills and wattlebirds. Flower colour can range from cream to pink to bright red often with contrasting yellow stamens. The

following are a few of our favourites.

Callistemon subulatus 'Brogo Overflow' is a plant that we have used as a hedge along a path. It is growing in very heavy clay beside a pond in full sun. This plant grows to about 2 metres by 2 metres but we prune it after flowering to keep it lower and back from the path. The pruning keeps the plants dense and encourages dense flowering. It has very dark green fine leaved foliage on slightly weeping branches.



'Brogo Overflow' hedge



'Brogo Overflow' flowers



C. 'Rowena' flowers

It flowers profusely with bright red flowers usually twice per year. It seems unaffected even by heavy frosts.

Callistemon citrinus 'Rowena' (above) is a cross made by Peter Ollerenshaw of Bywong Nursery between two selections of *C. citrinus*, one a red flowered form and the other a white flowering form. The result is a hot pink flowered shrub about 1.5 x 1.5 metres that takes care of itself. It doesn't require much pruning although you can take off the spent flowers when it has finished flowering. In contrast with the *C. subulatus* 'Brogo Overflow', the leaves are larger and a less intense green.

Callistemon citrinus 'Pink Champagne' (top right) is our favourite Callistemon. It is a large plant that can get to 3 metres high, but it has a rather narrow form so it doesn't take up much space in the garden. It has lanceolate leaves which form a compact mass so that it looks good even when not in flower. As the name implies, it has soft pink flowers in profusion in both spring and autumn.

Another useful smaller plant is *Meleleuca lateritia* which comes from the southwest region of Western Australia. The flowers of this plant are very similar to those of Callistemons and botanists have suggested that Callistemons and Melaleucas should be grouped together. The plant is very tough in Canberra conditions, taking our soils and frosts. *M. lateritia* has soft linear tapered leaves and a profuse flowering of very bright orange flowers over a long period of time. Ours even has some flowers in the winter. Normally the plant is about 1.5



M. lateritia



C. 'Pink Champagne'

metres high and about 1 metre wide but it can be trimmed to a smaller shrub if required. While it prefers full sun, it will tolerate some shade. The plant does best if it is regularly tip pruned but if it becomes leggy or unsightly, it can be cut to the ground and it will reshoot forming a new bush that will flower within a year or two after this dramatic treatment. It is best to do the dramatic pruning in the early spring so that the new growth doesn't get affected by the frost.

If you want a small tree 3-5 metres tall, then *Callistemon* 'Kings Park Special' is hard to beat. This plant occurred as a chance seedling in the Kings Park Botanic Gardens in Perth and its parentage is unknown. It grows very well here in Canberra and will quite rapidly grow to a small tree. If left alone, it will have branches to the ground but we have trimmed ours up so that we can grow other shrubs underneath. It is a plant that needs little care and is very reliable, an attractive tree even when not in flower.

When building our garden in Red Hill, we wanted to have a dense high front hedge along Wickham Crescent (see below). We used *Callistemon salignus* which is found in NSW up to Queensland. It has dramatic pink/red new foliage after rain which is similar to that of the exotic *Photinia* that is found in many gardens in the area. The foliage has narrow leaves and the plants have either pink or white flowers. The plants can get to be 4-10 metres high but we keep them to about 4-5 metres by a light trim once per year. This keeps the plants dense and encourages new growth. In some cases the plants become less dense near the ground so we have planted smaller plants in front of the main hedge.

There are more species and cultivars of Callistemons which are often available in the local nurseries. We have over 40 different species and cultivars in our garden and find that they are a most successful and trouble-free plant.



C. salignus hedge