



Full BOTTLE

Celebrating
the iconic
bottlebrush

by Leah Seabourne and Lauren Cabrera



With more than 40 species and an array of cultivars, the bottlebrushes are an iconic captivating plant with distinctive bottlebrush-shaped flowers. Bottlebrushes belong to the genus *Callistemon*, derived from two ancient Greek words; *calli* and *stemon*, which translates to beautiful stamens, referring to the soft, colourful, pollen-tipped filaments arranged in a cylindrical spike.

Among the most iconic of Australian flowers is the bottlebrush. As recognisable as the golden wattle, banksia or kangaroo paw, bottlebrushes grow in every state of the country and these beautiful native shrubs are a special part of the east and west coast landscapes.

The common name ‘bottlebrush’ refers to their elongated, brush-like flowers and they encompass a diverse range of shrubs and small trees.

There are about 40 *Callistemon* species native to Australia with only two of these native to Western Australia—Albany bottlebrush (*Callistemon glaucus*) and lesser bottlebrush (*Callistemon phoeniceus*). Both Western Australian bottlebrushes are geographically widespread and neither is listed as threatened under the *Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016*. *Callistemon citrinus* also occurs in WA, but is an introduced species, native to New South Wales and Victoria.

SWEET NECTAR

Flowers of *Callistemon* have a sweet, delicious nectar that bees, butterflies and birds drink up with purpose and pleasure.

Native bottlebrushes are extremely attractive to nectar-feeding birds,

Opposite page

Left Albany bottlebrush (*Callistemon glaucus*) showing its colourful pollen-tipped filaments.
Right A mature Albany bottlebrush tree in bloom.

Photos – Marie Lochman



Top left Black and yellow jewel beetle on *Callistemon phoeniceus*.
Photo – Eddy Wajon/Sallyanne Cousans Photography

Top right *Callistemon phoeniceus* showing bright red brush-like flowers.
Photo – Jean and Fred Hort

Above right Beautiful stamens, ready to blossom.
Photo – Jiri Lochman

Above Bottlebrush wood was used by Aboriginal peoples to create spears and other tools.
Photo – Alex Gore

especially honeyeaters including wattlebirds, because they produce plenty of nectar and pollen. The Western Australian *Callistemon* have bright red flowers which serve to attract birds, as birds respond strongly to visual cues. Even some typically seed-eating birds, like black cockatoos, enjoy feeding on *Callistemon* flowers. A range of primarily insectivorous birds, such as fairy-wrens and thornbills also use *Callistemon* for their dense cover and to feed on insects attracted to the flowers.

To be effective pollinators, birds and other flower visitors must brush past the long stamens, collecting pollen, while getting to the nectar in the cup-like base of each flower, and then moving, carrying pollen, to another flower (from the plant's perspective preferably on another individual, thus achieving cross-pollination).

CULTURALLY SIGNIFICANT

The bottlebrush carries a wealth of cultural symbolism and practical uses for Aboriginal peoples. For thousands of years, indigenous Australians have found

diverse applications for the resilient tree, ranging from nourishment to medicinal remedies to weapons.

Callistemon phoeniceus is known as birdak or tubada by Noongar Traditional Owners of south-west Australia who obtained the ngongyang (nectar) either by simply licking the flower or making a sweet drink by mixing the flower with water. The sweet flower drinks were consumed at ceremonial occasions and the leaves and bark were steeped to create a healing tea with medicinal benefits.

The sturdy wood from larger bushes and trees was used to craft spears and digging sticks. The durable wood also lent itself to the creation of didgeridoos.

In contemporary Aboriginal art, the bottlebrush continues to be a symbol of the bond between nature and the human spirit.

HARDY BEAUTY

If there's one thing that bottlebrushes are known for is that they are extremely tough and long-lived, and thankfully for many aspiring gardeners, almost impossible to kill.

Facts about Callistemon

	<i>Callistemon glaucus</i>	<i>Callistemon phoeniceus</i>
Habitat	Occurs in swamps and drainage lines in low-lying jarrah forest or Banksia heath, on peat or sandy clay over laterite.	Occurs in shrubland and open woodland on flood plains, adjacent to streams, creeks or rivers, on brown to white sand.
Synonyms	<i>Melaleuca glauca</i>	<i>Melaleuca phoenicea</i>
Distribution	Endemic to the south-west of WA, a range of approximately 350 kilometres, from Wellington National Park near Worsley in the north to Torndirrup National Park near Albany in the south.	Endemic to WA, a range of approximately 1000 kilometres, from Kalbarri National Park in the north to Cape Arid National Park near Esperance in the south.
Physical features	Shrub 1–3.5 metres tall, fibrous bark, dark greyish green narrowly elliptic to narrowly obovate leaves, flowers in deep red cylindric spike, 90–150 millimetres long, held close to the end of the branches consisting of 20–120 flowers with red staminal filaments, with hirsute or pubescent (hairy) calyx tubes.	Shrub or tree 1–6.5 metres tall, linear-obovate to linear-elliptic leaves, flowers in red cylindrical spikes, 35–100 millimetres long, held along the branches consisting of 15–55 flowers with red staminal filaments, with glabrous (without hairs) wrinkled calyx-tubes.
Flowering periods	Flowers from October to December (spring and summer).	Flowers from October to January (spring and summer).



What makes them truly captivating are their distinctive bottlebrush-shaped flowers, with their long, cylindrical clusters of stamens that bloom red, pink, and cream commonly. There are also some bottlebrush plants that bloom in shades of purple, orange, and yellow.

Some botanists argue *Callistemon* should be included in the genus *Melaleuca* due to the morphological similarities. However, this taxonomic revision was not adopted by the WA Herbarium for the two WA species, nor at the current time by the Australian Plant Census.

European botanists and collectors of the late 18th century showed considerable interest in the plants of Australia. *Callistemon phoeniceus* was introduced to English horticulture in 1843 from seed supplied by James Drummond from the area around the Swan River colony.

Whether *Callistemon* or *Melaleuca*, they belong to the Myrtaceae family and tribe Melaleucae, which also includes the genera *Beaufortia*, *Calothamnus*, *Eremaea*, *Phymatocarpus* and *Regelia*.



Top right Bottlebrushes are a popular food source for bird pollinators, including Carnaby's black-cockatoos (*Zanda latirostris*).

Photo – Rachel Walmsley

Above A healthy *Callistemon phoeniceus* shrub.

Photo – Jean and Fred Hort

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