

# BOTTLEBRUSH TREE

It is March and Bottlebrush Trees (*Callistemon*) have started blooming in Hilton Head Plantation!

*Callistemon citrinus*, or the red bottlebrush, is indeed showing off its colors this spring. The brilliant red blooms are on continuous display from spring through fall.

The genus name *Callistemon* comes from the Greek words *kalli* meaning "beautiful" and *stemon* meaning "stamen" in reference to the showy stamens present on most species in this genus. *Citrinus* means "related to citrus", in reference to the fragrant leaves.



*Callistemon citrinus* (Crimson Bottlebrush) is an evergreen shrub with arching branches clothed with lance-shaped leaves that emerge coppery before maturing to a medium green. Leaves have a lemony scent when bruised.

Although *Callistemon* is an Australian native., it grows well in our Southern climate. *Callistemon* can grow to 10 feet, but smaller cultivars are available (Little John).

It is most commonly available in red, but other colors are available, such as bright purple, yellow, white, or green. It doesn't tolerate wet feet but is drought- and salt-tolerant.

# Birds and Bottlebrush Flowers: A Love Story

Few plants are as attractive to birds as the bottlebrush tree. Here, bottlebrush are usually the crimson-flowered variety (although there are white and green kinds) and are often buzzing with hummingbirds and songbirds. Warblers, tanagers, buntings, and orioles seem to be especially drawn to these flowers.

In addition to hummers (the bird's wings actually do make a humming sound at times), our resident mockingbirds sip nectar at the base of the bristly petals. Cardinals actually tear the brush-shaped blossoms apart and consume the entire flower. Tiny warblers rustle and push against the flowers in order to get to the base where ants and other minute insects are feeding. In this way, the bush really provides a banquet for a large number of wildlife throughout the day.

		
<i>Male Cape May Warbler</i>	<i>Prothonotary Warbler</i>	<i>Young Male Orchard Oriole</i>
		
<i>Female Scarlet Tanager</i>	<i>Young Male Indigo Bunting</i>	<i>Female Ruby-throated Hummingbird</i>

Tiny emerald green birds with bright red throats zip through drooping boughs of the bottlebrush tree at the end of the house. They are the male scouts of the Ruby-throated Hummingbirds. The females will follow in a couple of weeks.

So what do the Bottlebrush Trees get in return from the birds? Short answer: pollination. Nectar-hungry birds deliver pollen grains from the anthers of flowers onto the stigmas of others thus fertilizing the plants.

Bottlebrush flowers produce copious nectar and pollen. Some birds feeding on the flowers are covered in pollen and may have heads and faces stained with yellow pollen and/or nectar.

Although in most cases birds probably only acquire minimal additional nutritional benefit from pollen, the nectar must be a welcome burst of calories after a daunting migratory flight.

Hilton Head is in the fall/winter migration path of many bird species, including Warblers.

## Butterflies and Bees also adore Bottlebrush



*Monarch Butterflies*



*Zebra longwing butterflies*



*Zebra Heliconian*



*Yellow Swallowtail*



*Viceroy Butterfly*



*Red-spotted purple*



*Palamedes swallowtail*



*Insects*



*Bee on Bottlebrush*



*White bottlebrush tree, Callistemon salignus (rare in US)*

## Quick Reference Growing Guide

Plant Type:	Evergreen flowering shrub	Color:	Red, white, yellow/blue-green, green, silver
Native to:	Australia	Maintenance:	Low
USDA:	Zone 8-11	Tolerance:	Heat, drought
Blooms:	Spring and summer	Soil Type:	Well-draining
Exposure:	Full sun	Soil pH:	5.6-7.5
Height:	Up to 25 feet	Family:	Myrtaceae
Spread:	Up to 15 feet	Genus:	<i>Callistemon</i>
Water:	Low	Species:	<i>citrinus, salignus, viminalis</i>
Deer	Resistant	Rabbits	Resistant
Toxicity	<i>Non-Toxic to Dogs, Non-Toxic to Cats, Non-Toxic to Horses. Do not confuse with Aesculus parviflora, a toxic Buckeye, which also is sometimes called "Bottlebrush"</i>		

Bottlebrush are evergreen and fast growing. They provide a fast privacy screen and an excellent habitat for birds.

Although susceptible to freezes, Bottlebrush recover quickly and do not sustain lasting damage. During our winters — some of which were unusually chilly — cold damage in our garden was limited, and each of the trees recovered without affecting the next season's bloom.

One of the most amusing activities to watch is the bathing rituals of some of our avian guests. We have a bird bath in our garden with a running dripper, which provides fresh, clean water for the birds to drink, and bathe in.

Although exotic plants reportedly do not support the diversity of insect life that is so critical to maintaining healthy bird populations, Bottlebrush Trees might be the exception. Covered in birds and bugs, these glorious plants provide an oasis for birds and birders alike.

So, plant a Bottle Brush Tree where you can enjoy the show, sit back, and relax!

*Jacqueline*