

Embothrium coccineum – Chilean Fire Tree/Chilean Fire Bush

A stiffly upright shrub to small tree from southern Chile. In its natural territory it can reach perhaps 20m in the wild although cultivated plants rarely exceed 10m with a spread of 5m. Its narrow form makes it ideal for smaller gardens or spaces. It is a predominantly evergreen species that is fast-growing, makes a good fast screen and has the great advantage of flowering while still very young. It produces masses of fiery red blooms in the spring and early summer with the whole tree being covered in blooms.

Foliage is lanceolate in an attractive mid to dark green. It is evergreen except at the very coldest end of its range. The profuse, very showy flowers are tubular to 5 cm and occur in the spring and early summer and in a good year the whole tree is covered in eye-catching fiery red blooms. This tree is nectar producing and is very popular with hummingbirds and other nectar seeking birds.

The Fire Tree is frost hardy in Australian terms, happily taking temperatures down to -10°C. It is best in a sheltered position in full sun to light shade and with some wind protection. It is in the Proteaceae family and in common with species with Proteoid roots such as Grevilleas it is very effective at extracting trace elements from the soil and is best fertilised with a low phosphate fertiliser. It likes a well-drained neutral to acidic soil, once established it is quite drought tolerant.

Propagation

Seed requires no pre-treatment other than soaking overnight.

Sow seed to a depth of 3mm in a well-draining medium, preferably in a seedling tray. Maintain the medium in a lightly moist state. Place the seedling tray in a warm position with indirect light. Germination is best at around 18-20°C.

Be careful not to overwater small seedlings and to ensure good drainage as seed has a tendency to damping off.

Prick seedlings out into individual tubes at about 5cm, taking care not to damage the tender fibrous roots. Grow on as desired and plant out in their final position as they resent root disturbance. Choose a position in full sun to light shade with some protection from hot drying winds.

In cultivation, they want good drainage and sun, though partial shade will do. They must not be fertilised with anything containing phosphorus.