

## Plant of the Month - December

by Allan Carr

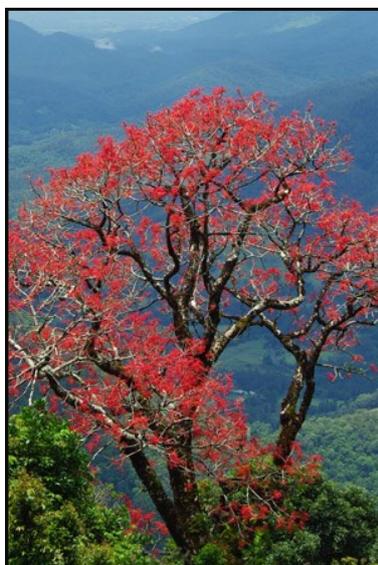
### *Brachychiton acerifolius*

Flame Tree

**Pronunciation:** brack-ee-KY-ton ay-sir-a-FOAL-ee-us

STERCULIACEAE

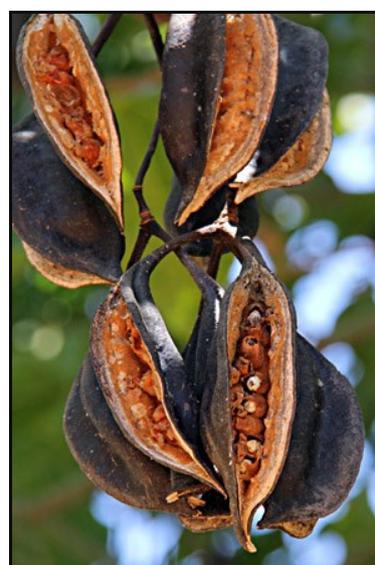
**Derivation:** *Brachychiton*, from the Greek *brachys* – short, and *chiton* – a type of tunic, as a reference to the coating on the seed; *acerifolius*, suggests the appearance of the foliage is similar to that of the genus *Acer*, the maples.



Habit



Flowers, buds



Fruits

There are around 31 species of *Brachychiton*, the majority of which are confined to Australia, mostly in tropical regions.

**Description:** *Brachychiton acerifolius* is a tall spreading tree to 35 m in its natural habitat in coastal scrubs and rainforest from Cape York in Qld to Illawarra in NSW, but will rarely reach more than 12 m in cultivation. The bark is grey or brown and finely fissured or wrinkled in older trees. Aboriginal people used to eat the seeds after roasting and pounding. The fibrous bark was used to make a cord with a variety of uses including fish nets. This tree is a host plant of a number of butterflies - Tailed Emperor (*Polyura sempronius*), Common Pencilled-blue (*Candalides absimilis*), Hairy Line-blue (*Erysichton lineata*) and Common Aeroplane (*Phaedyma shepherdii*).

**Leaves** are large, glossy green and partly deciduous when flowering takes place. These alternate leaves are up to 250 mm x 250 mm with 3 to 7 lobes.

**Flowers** are bell-shaped, 10 to 15 mm across in terminal \*panicles and brilliant red. They are waxy with 5 partially fused petals and appear on the tree from October to January.

**Fruits** are boat-shaped follicles 80 to 100 mm long, leathery, dark brown and pointed at the apex. These large fruits hang on the tree after they mature and split to reveal the rows of yellow seeds. Hairs surrounding the seeds are an irritant and are best handled with gloves.



\*panicle = branched flower stem