

Coral Tree

Erythrina indica – (syn *E. variegata*)

During a recent wood collecting exercise with members of the Northern Turners, we decided to follow up on a Coral Tree growing in the Waite Arboretum which had dropped a large branch. When cutting the branch into lengths for bowl blanks, we were surprised to hear the wood crack from the pith and made the assumption that the timber would be unstable and of little value to us. We only took a few pieces. After rough turning two bowls, I was surprised at the very fast rate of drying and its stability – in fact not a single check or crack. During the week after rough turning we had those two days of 40 degrees. The bowl had lost 1/3 of its weight in two weeks. I contacted Jennifer Gardener, but it was too late to obtain any more. The whole tree had been felled and removed. I therefore decided to research the tree and write about it for the Newsletter. It is not a commercial timber but has some interest as an oddity.

Derivation of names

Erythrina from Greek "erythros" – red, referring to the colour of the flowers
indica – from Latin "indicus" meaning from India.

The Tree

A small prickly branched tree to 12 metres high with an erect trunk having a diameter to 400mm. The bark is greyish in colour lightly furrowed yet quite smooth to touch. The branches have many thorns and form a dense crown. The leaves are large, glossy and are heart shaped. They have deeply marked venation and are sometimes variegated (thus *variegata*). The flowers are spectacular. They are brilliant red and are formed in large bunches (racemes). Individual flowers are curved and are pea shaped. The fruit are legumes containing about three hard, black, glossy bean shaped seeds.



Habitat

From India, although some references state it as being found in northern Queensland. It is successfully grown as an ornamental in cooler regions such as Adelaide.

Timber.

Because it is not a commercial timber, little detail is available about the characteristics of the timber. The common Australian member of the Genus is Batswing Coral Tree or Grey Corkwood (*Erythrina vespertilio*), which is commonly cited in reference books. One of my precious books is "The Timbers and Forest Products of Queensland" by E H F Swain, published in 1928. This refers to both species, but less detail with Coral Tree. They are the lightest Queensland and probably Australian timbers weighing about 300kg per cubic metre. Compare this with Radiata Pine and even Balsa (500 and 160kg per cubic metre respectively). Coral Tree is a white timber with fine medullary rays and little growth ring figure. From my limited experience it dries very well with little degrade. It is said to be reasonably strong but brittle and many references to it as a garden tree refer to it as having a problem with falling branches. It is soft and easy to work.

It is mainly planted as an ornamental tree because of its beautiful flowers. In India it was said to be used for light planking, tea boxes, toys and models. Timber from the Batswing Coral Tree was used by Aborigines for making shields.

Ron Allen, February 2007

