

## A few facts about *Ceratopetalum Gummiferum* the NSW Christmas Bush

**Ceratopetalum** is a small genus of 5 species, all occurring in Australia and New Guinea.

**Ceratopetalum** .... from two Greek words: ceras, a horn and petalon, a petal, referring to the petal shape of one species.

**Gummiferum** .... gum bearing, alluding to the richly exuded from cut bark.

The NSW Christmas bush is generally a large shrub or small tree and in cultivation it rarely grows to more than four to five metres high. The leaves are up to 70mm long and are divided into three leaflets which are finely serrated and the new growth is often pink or bronze coloured. *Ceratopetalum gummiferum* is widespread over the east coast of NSW, commonly growing in open forests on sandstone hillsides. In cultivation the plant must have a well drained but moist position, in sun or semi shade. Annual feeding with a slow release fertiliser is beneficial.

Towards the end of December this hardy and reliable plant puts on a great display of red 'flowers' that I admire so much – however all is not what it seems. The true flowers are white in colour and fairly insignificant and are seen in late spring to early November. After pollination by flies and native bees, the sepals, which are the outer series or whorl of floral leaves that protect the flower bud, enlarge and turn deep pink to red in colour enclosing the fruit, a single seed, a nut and the whole fall when ripe. When sowing, the whole fruit with calyx lobes attached should be sown for best results.

Plants known in other Australian states as Christmas Bush are entirely different and have no connection with *Ceratopetalum*.

### Sketch 1

Shows the massed red 'flower' display together with a few much smaller true white flowers.

### Sketch 2

Shows the enlarged pink/red sepals and some white flowers just starting to enlarge and change colour.

Some other examples of plants that enlarge and colour the sepals are the:

- Tropical South America *Bougainvilleas* where the actual flower of the plant is small and generally white, but each cluster of three flowers is surrounded by three or six bracts with the bright colors associated with the plant.
- *Hydrangea* the flowerheads contain two types of flowers, small fertile flowers in the middle of the flowerhead, and large, coloured, sterile bract-like flowers in a ring around the edge of each flowerhead.



Sketch 1



Sketch 2