

# CASSIA FISTULA

By Stephanie Jackson

If you've ever seen *Cassia fistula* in full bloom it's a sight that you're unlikely to forget in a hurry. And if you're anything like me, you'll have added it to your list of must-have plants and, at the soonest opportunity, rushed to the nearest nursery to see if you could get your hands on this most spectacular of trees.



In spring and early summer, the naked skeleton of this deciduous tree, which is commonly known as Golden Shower Tree, is decked out with long racemes of buttercup yellow flowers. And it's around this time that the tree's new cloak of foliage begins to appear, except in some tropical regions where it often retains its light green leaves throughout the year.

You might not want to plant a tree that, in optimum conditions, can grow to a height of around 12 metres and a width of approximately 6 metres, but don't let that fact stop you, for it rarely develops into such a huge specimen in a home garden situation. Its dazzling display of flowers is followed by the appearance of long cylindrical seed pods, each of which contains numerous seeds encased in a black, sticky, and rather unpleasant smelling resin. And if you want to try your hand at propagating *C. fistula*, you'll find that it's very easy to grow from seed.

It's a tree that can tolerate light frost and that is drought hardy once established, and if planted in well drained soil in a site with full sun or light shade it will reward you with its wonderful floral display. This is a tree that requires minimal maintenance, other than a little pruning after flowering to maintain a compact shape and to prevent it from becoming too straggly. Being deciduous, it produces plenty of fallen leaves that need to be raked up in winter, unless these are to be retained as mulch beneath the tree, and any fallen seed

pods should be removed too - both for aesthetic reasons and to prevent the seeds from germinating where they are not required.

The downside of growing *C. fistula* is that caterpillars of the white cabbage butterfly often feast on its foliage, and if they are not controlled, the tree can be completely denuded of foliage just when it should be looking at its best.

*Cassia fistula* is a native of the Indian sub-continent and adjacent south-east Asian countries where some parts of the tree are used in traditional herbal medicines, but it's the tree's vivid flowers that have seen it proclaimed as the national tree and floral emblem of Thailand, and the floral emblem of the Indian state of Kerala.



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