

Some botanical highlights in the Gardens in July 2017

The numbers refer to the gardens as shown on your map.

There is a great deal of interest in the Garden this month. In particular, as you wander around the Garden, look out for the tall, spiky flower of the Puyas. This is the flower that is depicted on the Garden logo (which appears at the bottom of this article) and we hold the national collection of this strange group of plants. These very spiky leaved plants are relatives of Bromeliads and they are native to the Andes mountains in South America. At this time of year, a number of them are coming into flower.



The fierce, spiky rosette of leaves deters browsing animals. Indeed, sheep have been found dead having become caught up in the barbs and unable to escape. It may be that, as they rot down, they add nutrients to the soil that benefit the Puya plants.

The flower spikes have many branches ending in pointed spikes. These spikes are used as perching posts for native birds which collect nectar from the flowers, thereby pollinating them. Look for Puyas particularly in the **American Garden (Near the Totem Pole)** and the **Arid Garden (16)**. *Puya chilensis* has yellow flowers (**Left below**); *Puya berteroniana* (**Right below**) has jade green flowers. However, many of the plants in the Garden are hybrids.



Left: *Puya chilensis* with chartreuse flowers

Right: *Puya berteroniana* with jade flowers

Soon after entering the Garden, the **South African Terrace (3)** is now a riot of colour. There are Pelargoniums, Osteospermums, yellow daisy bushes (*Euryops*), pink African mallows (*Anisodonte*), blue African Corn Lilies (*Agapanthus*) and many more, each represented by different species and cultivars. You will also notice *Watsonias* (**Right below**), plants which grow from corms with lance-shaped leaves and flower spikes bearing curved, tubular flowers in red, pink or orange. There are many different species of *Watsonia* found in the fynbos (heathland) in South Africa; several are grown in the Garden. Many are frost tender in this country. In the wild, they are pollinated by sunbirds.

As you pass through the **South African Terrace (3)**, just before entering the **Australian Garden (4)**, look to your left to see succulent plants growing and flowering on the rock outcrop. There is a large expanse of juicy Hottentot Fig, *Carpobrotus edulis*, but you will also see an orange flowering plant with mottled leaves. This is the Soap Aloe, *Aloe maculata* (**Left below**), so-called because the sap makes a soapy lather in water and was traditionally used as a form of soap for washing. It is widely planted in warm desert regions across the world as a landscape plant. The Latin name *maculata* refers to the speckled or marked leaves.



Left: Soap Aloe, *Aloe maculata*

Right: *Watsonia beatricis*

In the **Australian Garden (4)**, you will see a number of brightly coloured Bottlebrushes (*Callistemon*) (**Left below**) in flower. Several species, and numerous cultivars, of this quintessentially Australian plant are grown in the Garden. They are pollinated by nectar-feeding birds. One species, *Callistemon citrinus*, was first introduced to Kew Gardens by the botanist Joseph Banks in 1789.

As you follow the path round, you will come across a number of bushes of Tea Trees, *Leptospermum* (**Right below**), smothered with red, pink or white flowers. The common name, Tea Tree, derives from the practice of early Australian settlers who soaked the leaves of several species in boiling water to make a herbal tea, rich in ascorbic acid or Vitamin C. Nectar from the flowers are harvested by bees and used to make *Leptospermum* honey. In New Zealand, honey harvested from *Leptospermum* flowers is used to make manuka honey. You can find more Tea Tree bushes if you back track along the dirt path leading up the slope, just before leaving the **Australian Garden (4)**.



Left: Bottlebrush, *Callistemon linearis*



Right: Tea Tree, *Leptospermum* Burgundy Queen

At the back of the **Palm Garden (7)** is a large leaved evergreen Magnolia tree. It is bearing creamy flowers, which are best seen if you go through the furthest archway past the fine, red flowered Abutilon 'Red Bells'. Directly behind this, you can see the Magnolia. This is a very fine specimen of Delavay's Magnolia, *Magnolia delavayi* (**Left below**), a native to Southern China and not commonly grown in this country. It is not particularly hardy but it has some the largest leaves of any tree grown outdoors in this country. The flowers, however, are short-lived.

Also growing in the **Walled Garden & Long Border (13)**, close to the archway which leads through to the courtyard, you will find a tall bush with conspicuous greyish leaves and tall stems. It bears rather insignificant, well-spaced white flowers. This is the Bee Sage or Sacred Sage, *Salvia apiana* (**Right below**), which hails from the coastal sage scrub of southern California. The flowers are specially adapted to only accept larger bumblebees as pollinators. The plant has become very popular for incense burning in the States and large areas of hillside scrub have been stripped of the plant to provide 'smudge sticks' for wealthy Americans.



Left: Delavay's Magnolia, *Magnolia delavayi*



Right: Bee Sage, *Salvia apiana*

In the courtyard around the **edulis restaurant (9)** and in the **Mediterranean Garden (10)** you will notice a tall, grey foliated plant with yellow flowers. This is a Mullein or Verbascum and this particularly striking example is *Verbascum lydium* ssp. *Heterandrum* (**Left below**). It was originally grown from seed collected on the Greek island of Kos, close to the Turkish mainland. The greatest diversity of Mullein species is found in Turkey. Look for the dense covering of white fluffy hairs all over the plant, which help to reduce water loss.

At this time of year, the staircase down to the *edulis* restaurant is draped with fragrant white flowered Confederate Jasmine, *Trachelospermum jasminoides* (**Right below**), and the deep violet Passionflower, *Passiflora* 'Lavender Lady'. Both of these Mediterranean climbers do well on a sheltered sunny wall.



Left: Mullein, *Verbascum lydium heterandrum*

Right: Passion flower 'Lavender Lady' with
Trachelospermum jasminoides

Follow the path to the **Walled Garden & Long Border (13)** where you cannot fail to notice the tall banana trees. These are Japanese Banana, *Musa basjoo* (**Left below**), the hardiest species grown outdoors in this country. They do not often flower outside in this country but ours are producing long flowering stems with bunches of green (inedible) bananas and an extraordinary flower-head from which stigmas and stamens dangle down. Despite its name, they come from China, not Japan. Banana plants are not really trees. They are herbaceous perennials producing giant trunk-like pseudo-stems.

To the right of the big clump of bananas, you will see a Chinese Parasol Tree, *Firmiana simplex* (**Right below**), coming into flower. Rarely grown in this country, ours is a champion, the largest specimen in this country. It requires hot summers and good shelter to grow well in this country. The flowers are scented but the fragrance apparently varies with the weather and the time of day. Separate male and female flowers are born on the same plant. The timber from this tree is used for making soundboards of several Chinese instruments.



Left: Japanese Banana, *Musa basjoo*

Right: *Firmiana simplex*

In the vicinity of the **VBG Studio (19)** you can find Johnson's Grevillea (*Grevillea johnsonii*), (**Left below**) from New South Wales, Australia. The finely dissected, dark green foliage gives the impression of a weeping conifer but the flowers are unusual and extremely showy spidery coral-pink clusters. Johnson was a former director of the Botanic Garden in Sydney. It is rarely grown outside in this country. Unfortunately for us, it requires an acid soil, something which is in short supply at Ventnor. The plants have been grown in a deep bed of acid soil but their roots are now penetrating the soil beneath and the plants are suffering as a result.

Also nearby, behind a bench you can see a large clump of a succulent Aloe. This one is *Aloe striatula*, a shrubby succulent with yellow to orange flower spikes. It comes from South Africa, growing in the Eastern Cape and Lesotho in bushy and rocky places. Growing amongst it are the reddish flowers of the Sierra Madre Lobelia, *Lobelia laxiflora* (**Right below**) an attractive American lobelia which is pollinated by hummingbirds in the wild. Like other lobelias, it contains medicinally useful alkaloids.



Left: Johnson's Grevillea, *Grevillea johnsonii*

Right: *Aloe striatula* with *Lobelia laxiflora*

There is a lot to see in the **Arid Garden (16)**. Many of the succulent and spiky leaved plants are producing flowering stems this summer. The plants take many years to build up enough energy to produce these huge flowering stems and they frequently die after having done so. Centre stage, are two towering stems of a Giant Agave, *Agave salmiana* (**Left below**). A milky coloured alcoholic

beverage known as Pulque is made from the fermented sap of this Mexican plant. Pulque has been drunk for at least a thousand years and was originally a ritual drink consumed during festivals. In Aztec culture, it was drunk by priests and sacrificial victims.

Another striking flowering plant at the moment is another Mexican plant, *Nolina nelsonii* (**Right below**). This extremely drought tolerant plant is known from the deserts of northeast Mexico. It has a dense rosette of bluish-green leaves with finely toothed margins from which arises a flowering spike bearing thousands of small creamy flowers, very attractive to pollinating insects. There are separate male and female plants; ours are both male.



Left: Giant Agave, *Agave salmiana*



Right: *Nolina nelsonii*

This is just a taste of some of interesting plants growing the Garden. We hope you have enjoyed looking at some of the special plants which make the Botanic Garden unique.

There is always something new to see here throughout the year and every visit will bring new botanical surprises.



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