

Some botanical highlights in the Gardens in May 2017

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

The Garden is full of colour at the moment. The star plants are the giant blue Echiums, pink mounds of *Madeira cranesbills* and spectacular purple Foxglove trees but there are many other interesting plants to see. Here are some of the highlights.

You may have noticed the Madeira Cranesbill, *Geranium maderense*, **(below)** growing *en masse* along the roadside bordering the Garden as you arrive. If not, there are others in sheltered spots within the Garden. As you enter the Garden from **The Plantation Room Café (1)**, you will see one of these as soon as you enter the **Herb & Medicinal Garden (2)** but this one is a white flowered form. This magnificent, tender perennial is the largest and most spectacular of the *Geranium* species. It is a native of Madeira where it is an understorey plant of the native laurel forests, which at one time covered most of the island. What remains today is protected but, despite this, the Madeira Cranesbill is rarely seen in the wild. As the plants age, the older leaves begin to die and bend downwards. These fleshy leaf stalks return their water to the growing portion of the plant and they serve to prop up the rather top-heavy plants. Sadly, the plants die once they have flowered, but they produce abundant seed.



Madeira Cranesbill, *Geranium maderense*

There is an interesting bush growing on the slope below the carpark in the **Herb & Medicinal Garden (2)**. It is currently producing clusters of small red flowers just as the leaves are unfolding.



This is the Turpentine Tree, *Pistacia terebinthus*, **(left)** a native of the Mediterranean region. All parts of the plant have a strong, resinous smell. As its name suggests, the resin exuded by this plant is used as a source of turpentine, possibly the earliest known source.

Left: Turpentine Tree, *Pistacia terebinthus*

The **South African Terrace (3)** is now a riot of colour with Osteospermums, Pelargoniums, daisy bushes or *Euryops*, Red hot poker, fiery orange *Lampranthus* and bushes white flowered African Hemp or *Sparmannia africana*. Clumps of white Arum Lilies or *Zantedeschia aethops* are also looking their best at the moment. One of the showiest plants here at the moment is the Holly-leaved Senecio, *Senecio glastifolius* **(left below)**. It is difficult to miss it with its great mounds of pink daisy

flowers. It can be found in the wild in the fynbos along the coast in the Eastern Cape but where it has been grown in warmer climates in parts of Australia and elsewhere it has escaped from cultivation and become something of a pest. Even on Tresco, on the Isle of Scilly, it has established in the wild but in most parts of the country it cannot survive our winters.

Notice also, on the right of the path, a bush with rounded, greyish leaves and unusual but attractive orange-brown flowers which soon fade to brown. This is the Beach Salvia, *Salvia africana-lutea* (**right below**), another native of the Cape Region of South Africa, particularly in coastal areas on sand dunes. The aromatic leaves are used to make tea for treating coughs, colds and bronchitis.



Left: Holly-leaved Senecio, *Senecio glastifolius*



Right: Beach Salvia, *Salvia africana-lutea*

In the **Australian Garden (4)** several of the later flowering showy wattles or Acacias are in flower. The one to your right by the path with spiky leaves in whorls and short, creamy yellow flowers is known in Australia as Prickly Moses, *Acacia verticillata* (**right**). It comes from damp places in south-eastern Australia and Tasmania. This wattle was named by Sir Joseph Hooker, the second director of Kew Gardens and good friend of Charles Darwin.

Right: Prickly Moses, *Acacia verticillata*



A different acacia, with wide flattened 'leaves' and long, rather slender flower spikes, can be found by following the upper path around the **Australian Garden (4)** which looks back into the tree fern dell. This is the Sydney Coast Wattle, *Acacia longifolia*, (**left below**) a native of coastal Australia including Tasmania. It is distinctive in having wide, flattened 'leaves' (they are actually flattened stems or phyllodes) and long, rather slender, flower spikes. It is usually grown under glass in this country, but it thrives in some Cornish coastal gardens. It grows rapidly and has become a nuisance invasive plant in South Africa, where an Australian wasp which galls the flowers and prevents them from setting seed, has been introduced in an effort to control it. This has proved to be quite successful.



Left: Sydney Coastal Wattle, *Acacia longifolia*

In the **New Zealand Garden (6)**, you can see one of the showiest of the New Zealand flowering trees, known by the Maori name of Kowhai, *Sophora tetraptera*, **(left below)** bearing drooping clusters of yellow pea flowers. It is widespread in New Zealand where it's Maori name means yellow. Rather like our more familiar Laburnum trees, all parts of the plant are poisonous.

Another small tree now in flower in the New Zealand garden is the Wineberry, *Aristotelia serrata*, **(right below)** with pinkish young foliage and rose coloured flowers. It is a rapidly growing a colonist of cleared ground and forest margins. European settlers burnt the young straight shoots to produce charcoal for the production of gun powder.



Left: Kowhai, *Sophora tetraptera*



Right: Wineberry, *Aristotelia serrata*

Whilst in the **New Zealand garden (6)**, you cannot fail to be struck by the splendid heliotrope purple flowers of the Foxglove Tree, *Paulownia tomentosa* **(left below)** growing in the **Hydrangea Dell (5)**. A native of central and western China, the fragrant flowers are produced before the leaves open. An old custom in China was for this fast growing tree to be planted at the birth of a girl. She was considered to be eligible for marriage when the tree is ready to be cut down and the wood is carved into decorative objects for her dowry. The soft, lightweight seeds of this tree were commonly used as a packing material by Chinese porcelain exporters in the early 19th Century and, when they reached their destination, the seeds would often be discarded to germinate in their new homes. You can see a second tree flowering in the **Walled Garden & Long Border (13)**.



Left: Foxglove Tree, *Paulownia tomentosa*



Right: New Zealand Satin Flower, *Libertia grandiflora*

In the **Palm Garden (7)** and elsewhere you will notice white flowered wands of the New Zealand Satin Flower, *Libertia grandiflora* (**right above**). The plant has characteristic strap shaped leaves and tall flower stems with white, three-petalled flowers, indicating that it is a member of the Iris family. They will flower for many months and you will find plants in many parts of the Garden as it spreads quite vigorously with us. This is a native of New Zealand, found along streamside and within forests, principally in the North Island.

The firework display of giant Echiums is one of the best known and loved features of Ventnor Botanic Garden. Although you will see plants throughout the Garden, they can be seen at their best in May in the **Mediterranean Garden (10)**. They all come from the laurel forests on the Canary Isles and Madeira but look carefully at them and you will see that they are not all the same. The one most often seen in gardens is *Echium piniana*, originally from La Palma. It produces a single tall flowering stem in its second or third year bearing mauve flowers and then dies, seeding copiously. Others are perennial and produce woody, branched stems giving rise to a mound of foliage and tight spikes of bright blue flowers. *Echium candicans* from Madeira, where it is known as the Pride of Madeira, is one of those. Other species are also grown here and, unfortunately, they cross with one another freely producing a whole range of perplexing hybrids. One species which is very distinctive is the true blue *Echium gentianoides* from La Palma, which has large sky-blue flowers and smooth, grey-green leaves.





Tree Echiums **Top left:** *Echium piniana* **Top right:** *Echium candicans* **Bottom left:** *Echium gentianoides* The plant in the **Bottom right** is the Judas Tree, *Cercis siliquastrum*

In the centre of the **Mediterranean Garden (10)** look out for the Judas Tree, *Cercis siliquastrum*, which is bearing clusters of pink pea flowers on its bare trunk and stems. It is so-called because it was long believed that this was the tree on which Judas hung himself.

In the **Walled Garden & Long Border (13)**, look for an interesting and rarely seen bush which has stems which are currently covered with clusters of small, pinkish flowers. This is Wild Rhea *Debregeasia longifolia*, (**left below**) a member of the Nettle family but with attractive slender, lance-shaped non stinging leaves. It is a native of Eastern Asia and China through to the Himalayas The plant is gathered from the wild mainly for the high quality strong fibre obtained from the stem bark. In the autumn, it bears clusters of attractive orange berries but for this to happen, both sexes need to be planted. Our plant is a male and it dates from one of the original Hillier plantings in the 1970s.



In the **Arid Garden (16)** look for the distinctive Mexican Lily, *Beschorneria septentrionalis* (**right above**) with its long red flowering stems. This is the most northerly occurring of the seven species, native to dry woodland in the mountains of north-east Mexico where it is attractive to hummingbirds.

There are many interesting plants in flower around the **Top Lawn**. One of these is Rough Guinea Flower, *Hibbertia aspera* (**left below**) a low growing, spreading shrub native to Australia where it grows on sandy soils in open forest and heath in Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria. Further along on the right you can find an evergreen bush with shiny leaves and clusters of creamy

flowers, each with four petals. This is *Picconia excelsa* (**right below**) It grows in the native laurel forests on the Canaries and Madeira, where it is threatened by habitat loss.



Left: Rough Guinea Flower, *Hibbertia aspera*

Right: *Picconia excels*

**We hope you have enjoyed looking at some of the special plants
which make Ventnor Botanic Garden unique.**

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

