

Some botanical highlights in the Gardens at the moment

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

There is plenty of colour in the Garden this month but our flagship plants, which are at their very best, are the giant Echiums. You will notice them throughout the Garden but the best show is in the **Mediterranean Garden (10)**. Our Echiums are endemic plants from Macronesia, the groups of islands in the north Atlantic off the coast of Europe and north Africa. **Giant Echiums (*Echium pinnianum*)** have impressive towering blue spires of flowers. They come from the Canary Islands where they grow in the native laurel forests and are endangered by habitat loss.



There are many species of woody Echium on the Canaries, often confined to single islands or isolated mountain tops. At one time we grew many different species in the Garden but they have a tendency to hybridise with each other. The cold weather in March of this year killed off most of the tender species and we are left with a hybrid swarm of plants with flower colours varying from pale blue, bright blue, mauve and pink. Some are single stemmed and others form branched woody plants. This explains why, if you look closely, you will see a range of flower colour and growth form in the plants. Meanwhile, here are some other plants to look out for on your tour of the Garden. There is plenty of colour in the Garden at the moment.



Just after passing through the Fig Pergola, if you turn right and walk to the commemorative seating area, you will find an unusual shrub in flower bearing yellow pom-pom flowers. This one is not a South African plant but a native of Chile. It is known there as **Mitique**, *Podanthes ovatifolius*. It is a shrubby member of the daisy family. It has traditional medicinal uses amongst which, apparently, it was used for the treatment of gonorrhoea and urinary tract infections. This plant is very rarely grown in this country but a good plant of it can be seen in Chelsea Physic Garden.

The **South African Terrace (3)** is now full of colour. One of the more unusual showy plants at the moment is the **Holly-leaved Senecio**, *Senecio glastifolius* (right below), 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.

The red hot poker are also striking, in particular the clumps of *Kniphofia northiae* (left below) on the left hand terrace. This one was named after the well-travelled Victorian botanical artist, Marianne North, who has a gallery of her art work at Kew. This red hot poker is notable for its very distinctive foliage with broad, grey-green agave-like leaves. In its native South Africa it can be found along the banks of streams at high altitude.



Left: *Kniphofia northiae*



Right: Holly-leaved Senecio, *Senecio glastifolius*

As soon as you enter the **Australian Garden (4)** you will see a splendid bottle brush covered with creamy flowers on your right hand side. This is the **Lemon Bottlebrush**, *Callistemon pallidus*. It is a common plant in rocky areas of southeast Australia and can become a dominant species in heathland. It is a popular ornamental shrub in Australia where it has proved easy to grow in gardens.

Also to the right of the path but a little further along, is a large bush of **Muskwood**, *Olearia argophylla*, currently awash terminal bunches of small daisy flowerheads smelling faintly of musk and silvery undersides to the large leaves. It comes from wet evergreen forests in south-east Australia. Timber from the tree is sought after by woodworkers; burls near the base of the tree are prized for their brown swirls. This is the largest of the *Olearias* or daisy bushes, a large group of plants from Australia and New Zealand.



Left: Lemon Bottlebrush, *Callistemon pallidus*



Right: Muskwood, *Olearia argophylla*

In the **New Zealand Garden (6)**, you will notice a number of twiggy bushes bearing lots of small yellow flowers. This is the **Wire-netting Bush, *Corokia x virgata*** (left below). Corokias have dark stems which grow in a tangled zigzag fashion and small leaves earning them the name of Wire-netting Bushes in New Zealand. The growth form is an adaptation against the windy, rocky situations where they grow and also as a deterrent to grazing animals and birds. The flowers are pollinated by a single species of native bee.

Another interesting plant to look for is ***Myoporum laetum*, the Mousehole Tree** (right below). It is a tall bush with shiny evergreen leaves, situated towards the far end of the New Zealand Garden. The native name of Mousehole Tree refers to the translucent dots (oil glands) on the leaves which you can see if you hold a leaf up to the light. It bears clusters of pretty little flowers which are white with purple spots. This plant is widely planted as an evergreen species and for hedging in warmer parts of the world but, like so many plants in the Garden, it is not hardy.



Left: Wire Netting Bush, *Corokia x virgata*



Right: Mousehole Tree, *Myoporum laetum*

In the **Palm Garden (7)** you will notice white flowered wands of the **New Zealand Satin Flower, *Libertia grandiflora***. 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, in 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 **Long Border (13)** is just starting to develop colour but a fascinating plant growing there to look for this month is the **Dragon Arum, *Dranunculus vulgaris***. Look for them particularly at the back of the border beneath the wall. Each plant produces tall upright clumps of foliage with leaf stems blotched with purple and very distinctive leaves. From them emerges a rather sinister flower comprising a large purple spathe wrapped around an upright purple spadix. When the

flower is ready for pollination, it emits an unpleasant smell, reminiscent of rotting meat, to attract flies. Any flies that land on the flower, slip down into it and are only released when flower withers. This is the most spectacular of the European arums. It is a native of the eastern Mediterranean where it can be found in olive groves and on waste land. In Greece, this plant is known as drakondia, the long spadix being viewed as a small dragon hiding in its spathe.



Left: New Zealand Satin Flower, *Libertia grandiflora*



Right: Dragon Arum, *Dranunculus vulgaris*

The **Mediterranean Garden (10)** is at its peak this month. The Giant Echiums are particularly spectacular, but there are also bushes of various species of pink and white flowered Sun Roses (*Cistus*) and Jerusalem Sage (*Phlomis fruticosa*) with grey leaves and upright stems bearing clusters of yellow tubular flowers. The landscape here is reminiscent of the Mediterranean maquis vegetation where the shrubby plants come into full flower in the spring before the searing heat of summer dries everything up. Look for the architectural tall branched umbels of the **Giant Fennel, *Ferula officinalis*** (right below) rising from a mound of yellowing finely-cut foliage. This plant is very much a feature of the Mediterranean landscape.

Another plant to look for here is the **Canary Island Geranium, *Geranium palmatum*** (left below). This large geranium is a native of sunny areas around the coast in the Canaries and Madeira and forms mounds of pink flowers. It is an annual or short-lived perennial but is slightly hardier than the Giant Herb Robert, *Geranium maderense*, which we lost to the cold last winter.



Left: Canary Island Geranium, *Geranium palmatum*



Right: Giant Fennel, *Ferula officinalis*

In the **Arid Garden (16)** at the moment you will see a striking clump of spiky leaved plants producing fat creamy heads of densely packed bell-shaped flowers. This is the **Spanish Dagger, *Yucca schidigera***, a highly drought-tolerant plant of the Mojave desert. Traditionally, the plant was used by Native Americans to make rope, sandals and cloth. Today, a highly processed extract of this plant is frequently added to processed cat and dog food because it has been demonstrated to reduce waste odours by up to 20%. Our plant is excelling itself this year by producing five flowering spikes. Look also for the distinctive **Mexican Lily, *Beschorneria septentrionalis*** growing nearby. It has long red flowering stems. This is the most northerly occurring of the seven species of *Beschornea*, native to dry woodland in the mountains of north-east Mexico

where it is attractive to hummingbirds. Elsewhere in the Garden, at the entrance to the Tunnel, you will find the related and more commonly grown *Beschorneria yuccoides* which has grey green Yucca like leaves and long flowering stems held at a jaunty angle.



Left: Spanish Dagger, *Yucca schidigera*



Right: Mexican Lily, *Beschorneria septentrionalis*

Another group of plants to look out for on in the Arid Garden are the very spiky leaved Puyas, for which the Garden holds the national collection. These relatives of Bromeliads are native to the Andes mountains in South America. At this time of year, a number of them are coming into flower. The big fat 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. If you are very fortunate, you might find that some of our birds have learnt this habit. The flowers, when they open, can be striking colours. *Puya chilensis* has yellow flowers; *Puya beteroana* has jade green flowers. However, many of the plants grown in the Garden are hybrids.



Left: Flower spikes of *Puya beteroana*



Right: Jade green flowers of *Puya beteroana*



Also in the Arid Garden, on a bank by the road, is a group of the **Spiral Aloe (*Aloe polyphylla*)** which is currently producing stems bearing orange tubular flowers.

The succulent leaves grow in a distinctive spiral arrangement following the mathematical principle of the Fibonacci sequence, either clockwise or anticlockwise. It is an endemic of the Drakensburg mountains at high altitude in the kingdom of Lesotho where it is endangered in the wild due to excessive collection. The flowers are pollinated by a single bird species which is itself in decline.

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

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