



Some botanical highlights in the Gardens this September

THE NUMBERS REFER TO THE GARDENS AS SHOWN ON YOUR MAP.

Here is a small selection of the interesting plants which you can find in the Garden this month.



As soon as you enter the Garden, look for the newly planted bed behind the Plantation Café building. Amongst the plants you will see here is a group of bushy plants with striking inflated green pods bearing soft bristles. This is a South African plant which goes by the name of ***Gomphocarpus physocarpus*** or in English, Swan Plant or Bishop's Balls!(above left). Look closely and you will see the clusters of small white flowers which are both attractive and complicated in structure. It is a member of the milkweed family and is often grown in North American gardens because it is the favoured food plant for caterpillars of the Monarch butterfly.

The **South African Terrace (3)** is currently a feast of colour with a huge range of plants in flower. There are African Corn Lilies or Agapanthus, Pelargoniums, Osteospermums, brightly coloured Arctotheca and Gazania daisies, pink Crinum lilies, Bugle lilies (*Watsonia*) and Crocosmias, each represented by different species and cultivars. These are all South African plants which thrive outside here. The yellow daisy flowers spreading across the path are **Cape Marigolds, *Arctotheca calendula***. This is a widespread plant in South Africa, growing along roadsides, old farmlands and on disturbed ground. In earlier times, the grey felt on the undersides of the leaves was scraped off and used for tinder.

It is worth exploring a little in the **South African Terrace**. If you walk down through the Fig Pergola and follow the steps down, you will find an interesting grouping of South African plants. Straight ahead of you, you will see a small tree with soft, silvery leaves. This is very special. It is the **Silver Tree, *Leucadendron argenteum***. On sunny days, it glistens with a stunning silvery sheen. The leaves are covered with a dense layer of hairs which trap air and reduce water loss through the leaves, a useful adaptation for a plant which grows on dry, stony soil in a restricted area of the fynbos around Cape Town, where it is an endangered species. On wet days, the hairs of the leaves stand more erect to allow for free circulation of air, and the leaves look less silvery. The tree can grow many meters high, as it does in Abbey Garden on Tresco, but it is a difficult and demanding plant to grow. Away from the Scillies, it is rarely grown outside in this country and ours, now over two metres in height, is probably the only one outside of Cornwall. We are relieved that it survived the 'Beast for the East' earlier in the year.

Also in this part of the Garden you can see an interesting grouping of **Pineapple Flowers, *Eucomis*** in flower. We grow several of the eleven species in the Garden. All are native to grasslands and swamps in South Africa and they all have a

topknot of leaves above the flowers, vaguely reminiscent of pineapple flowers. They are all late summer flowering bulbs.



Left: *Arctotheca calendula*;



Right: A range of Pineapple flowers or *Eucomis lilies*

In the **Palm Garden (7)** you can see a very architectural plant with very large divided leaves up to a metre in length, borne on suckering, spiny stems. This is the **Japanese Angelica Tree, *Aralia elata*** (left below). It is originally from Japan, Korea and northern China and was introduced in Europe around 1830. The small white flowers are borne in large umbels in late summer and very attractive to bees. These are followed by black fruits, technically known as drupes. In Japan, the young shoots are eaten in the spring. They are picked from the end of the branches and fried in a tempura batter. Beneath this bush, are clumps of an orange flowered **Ginger Lily, *Hedychium densiflorum***.



Left: Japanese Angelica Tree, *Aralia elata*



Right: *Hedychium densiflorum*

It is worth visiting the **Campsis Arbour**, below the Palm Garden at the moment, where you will find a selection of varieties of the **Trumpet Vine, *Campsis radicans***, climbing over the pergola. This is a native of the eastern United States but it is a commonly grown plant in Mediterranean gardens where it benefits from hot summers to induce flowering. In the States, the flowers are pollinated by hummingbirds. Also here, look at the bushes of red- flowered ***Abutilon* 'Red Bells'**. This is a particularly floriferous form of *Abutilon* which is in flower with us for much of the year.



Left: Trumpet Vine, *Campsis radicans*



Right: *Abutilon* 'Red Bells'

The **Long Border (13)** is full of colour this time of year with a particularly good range of showy *Salvia* species starting to take centre stage. But there are plenty of other interesting and showy plants. One plant growing here and elsewhere in the Garden which always attracts attention is **Pokeweed, *Phytolacca clavigera*** (left below) with its tall spikes of juicy black berries. These berries are attractive to birds who are responsible for spreading the plant around the Garden, but they are poisonous to mammals.

Also along this border, look for the strange, two-lipped deep blue hooded flowers of ***Strobilanthes attenuata*** (right below) growing on rounded bushes with dark green hairy leaves. This is a plant from northern India and Nepal with a long flowering period. There are several species of *Strobilanthes* growing in the Garden. This one is the earliest flowering of them.



Left: Pokeweed, *Phytolacca clavigera*



Right: *Strobilanthes attenuata*

In the **Arid Garden (20)**, look for a very special prickly shrub growing alongside the woodchip path running parallel to but above the Tropical House. This is where ***Colletia ulicina***, from central Chile, is growing, a plant rarely seen in this country. It has an ungainly habit and a gorse-like growth but it bears stunning tubular pink flowers which are usually pollinated by bumble bees but also by humming birds. The spines are not leaves but modified stems.

A final plant to be found in the Arid Garden, can be seen if you walk up the diagonal path between the palm trees, is a spiny leaved Bromeliad plant, vicious looking yet with delicate pink flower-heads looking rather like a pineapple with orange stamens. There has been some debate about the correct name for this plant but it is probably ***Ochagavia litoralis***, an endemic from the coastal zone of central Chile. It can grow in dense stands on steep, seaside cliffs.



Left: *Colletia ulcina*



Right: *Ochagavia litoralis*

Finally, don't forget to visit the **Tropical House (18)** to view the giant waterlilies. There are two species of Giant Amazonian Waterlilies growing in the pond in the Tropical House this summer. The one with the largest flowers and lily pads with strongly upturned edges is ***Victoria amazonica***, which was originally named in honour of Queen Victoria by John Lindley, assistant secretary to the Royal Horticultural Society in 1837. It is not an easy plant to grow in this country, requiring much heat and light, but it became a subject of rivalry amongst top Victorian gardeners vying to grow it and impress their guests. The Dukes of Devonshire and Northumberland started a competition to see who could be the first to bring the plant into flower. The Duke of Devonshire was the winner, in November 1848 at Chatsworth House using coal-fired boilers for heating. The second species of Amazon waterlily is ***Victoria cruziana***. It has thick upturned leaf margins up to 20cm high. It can grow in slightly cooler conditions as it originates from higher altitude sites in Bolivia. Kew's original plants and seeds were lost during World War II but, remarkably, it survived in the bomb-damaged conservatory at the University of Helsinki botanic garden and after the War, Helsinki distributed seed to many botanical gardens. This strain of *Victoria cruziana* is still the strain grown in most botanic gardens around the world. The two species do not meet in the wild but our Curator, Chris Kidd, has successfully crossed the two to produce hybrid plants.



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.

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