

Some botanical highlights in March in the Garden

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



Our tree Magnolias have reached perfection and you will see them as soon as you enter the carpark! Each year, as they grow bigger, they have more flowers. Last year, the 'Beast from the East' put pay to the flowering display but this time you can see white flowered *Magnolia campbelli alba*, stunning pink *Magnolia campbelli* Charles Raffill and pinky-mauve *Magnolia campbellii mollicomata*. Other tree magnolias will come into flower over the coming weeks. Also flowering now, earlier than usual, is the Hillier vintage *Magnolia x soulangeana* just beyond the Fig Pergola.

On the **South African Terrace (3)** notice the bushes of yellow daisy flowered **Honey Euryops, *Euryops virgineus***. This is an endemic of the fynbos of the southern coastal areas of South Africa and the sweetly scented, nectar-rich daisy flowers are very attractive to pollinating insects. At a lower level on the South African Terrace, below the main footpath, there is a bush of the pink flowered **Myrtle-leaved Milkwort, *Polygala myrtifolia*** which comes from the same area of South Africa as the Euryops. It is called September bush in South Africa because the peak flowering occurs in their springtime. The attractive flowers, which close at night, look a bit like pea flowers but belong to quite a different family. You can find wild milkworts growing in the country but they are much smaller plants. The Common Milkwort grows on our downs and can have blue, pink or white flowers. If you are unable to locate this plant you can see another in the borders of the Top Lawn as you leave the Garden.



Left: Honey Euryops, *Euryops virgineus*

Right: Myrtle-leaved Milkwort, *Polygala myrtifolia*

It is worth paying a special visit to the bank below the Plantation Room Café. Here you will see a bush with stunning magenta tubular flowers, **Inca bell**, *Cantua buxifolia*. It was introduced to this country by a Cornish plant hunter, William Lobb and first flowered in May 1848, but, it is invariably grown as a conservatory plant as it is very susceptible to the slightest frost. It is a native of Peru and Bolivia and is the national flower of Peru. It is also known as the Sacred Flower of the Incas because there is legend that it symbolised the Inca people's unity when two ruling kings were mortally injured.

In the **Americas**, (in the vicinity of the **Totem Pole** on your map) the white flowered evergreen **Winter's Bark**, *Drimys winteri* trees are in flower, a native of Chile and Argentina where it is a dominant tree in the temperate coastal evergreen rainforests. When Sir Francis Drake sailed around the world in 1577-80, of the four ships accompanying the Golden Hind at the outset, the only ship that successfully rounded Cape Horn with him was the Elizabeth, captained by John Winter. The two ships separated in a storm and Winter turned back. Presumably, he had sea sickness on board, for he sent a boat ashore to search out medicinal herbs. He returned in 1579 with a supply of *Drimys bark* and, for centuries before vitamin C was isolated, 'Winter's Bark' was esteemed as a preventative and remedy for scurvy. Indeed, an infusion of the bark sustained Captain James Cook and his crew in the South Pacific and the naturalist accompanying his voyage of exploration, Johann Reinhold Forster, was the first to officially describe and name *Drimys winteri*.



Left: Inca Bells, *Cantua buxifolia*

Right: Winter's Bark, *Drimys winteri*

The **Mediterranean Garden (11)** is a particularly warm and sunny part of the Garden at this time of year and the shrubby spurges or Euphorbias are putting on a fine show. Particularly distinctive are the bushy clumps of **Mediterranean Spurge, *Euphorbia characias*** on the south facing terrace. This is a characteristic plant of dry, stony places in the Mediterranean. Look for *Euphorbia characias wulfenii* which has golden flower heads and the main species *Euphorbia characias characias* with a more compact head and flowers with a dark eye, actually dark brown nectar glands. All Euphorbias exude a sticky milky sap when cut, which burns the skin and is very harmful to the eyes but has been used in traditional medicines since ancient times to treat skin excrescences. Also on these terraces, you will see that the shrubby Echiums, a signature plant of the Garden, are just starting to come into flower. The bushy, grey-leaved Echium close to our big beech tree is known as **Pride of Madeira, *Echium candicans***. Whilst many of our shrubby Echiums come from the Canaries, as the name suggests, this one is from Madeira. Each bush produces many blue flowerheads with red stamens, very attractive to pollinating bees. We once grew many different species of shrubby Echium in the Garden but they have hybridised prolifically so that very few are the pure species here today. If you look at the young Echium plants which are growing prolifically on the Mediterranean terrace you will see that some of them look very different from each other in foliage. They vary in hairiness, leaf colour and habit.



Left: Mediterranean Spurge, *Euphorbia characias*

Right: Pride of Madeira, *Echium candicans*

Much more difficult to find in the Mediterranean Garden, but worth the effort, are the low growing, strange honey scented flowers of an iris relative, the **Snake's Head Iris, *Hermodactylis tuberosa***. The flowers are apple green with velvety black falls. This is an early flowering Mediterranean plant of rough, rocky places. There is a clump growing close to the path near the circular bed with the statue.



Snake's Head Iris, *Hermodactylis tuberosa*

In the **Olive Grove (14)**, you will notice a bush of white-flowered weeping broom on the bank below the Tropical House. This is **White Broom, *Retama raetam*** . Found throughout the Mediterranean and in the Sahara, this plant is well adapted to arid conditions with green, wispy, leafless stems. The attractive scented flowers, which are abundantly produced, are pollinated by bees. Immediately behind the White Broom, higher up on the bank, you can see a Strawberry Tree in flower. This is the **Canary Madrone, *Arbutus canariensis***, a plant of laurel forests in the Canary Isles. The clusters of waxy flowers are pink and the strawberry-like fruits are golden yellow. It is a species of strawberry tree that is not often grown in this country being not particularly hardy. Ours were damaged by the 'Beast from the East' last spring but have recovered well. There is another at the top of the steps leading from the Mediterranean Garden to the Tropical House.



Left: White Broom, *Retama raetam*

Right: Canary Madrone, *Arbutus canariensis*

Away from the main part of the Garden, if you visit the **Oriental Garden (12)** you will see many flowering Camellias at the moment. If you walk along the path bordering the lawn, you will come across a rather fine, tall flowering buddleia bush. Its name, ***Buddleja officinalis***, suggests that this is a rather ordinary plant but, in fact, it is a splendid scented winter flowering bush generally reserved for the conservatory in this country. As you continue along this path you will come across another flowering bush on the left hand side with fragrant creamy white flowers in strings amongst the shiny evergreen leaves on a very spiny shrub. This is ***Prinsepia utilis***, a member of the Rose family. The plant, a native of the Himalayas, is named after James Prinsep, a scholar, antiquarian and secretary of the Asiatic Society of Bengal. The fruits have a stringent taste but they yield an edible oil.



Left: *Buddleja officinalis*

Right: *Prinsepia utilis*

In the **Walled Garden (13)** look out from a tall, rather lax plant with large, velvety leaves and flower-heads a bit like ragwort. We now know this to be **Velvet Groundsel, *Roldana petasitis*** although our plants were previously mis-named. It comes from the mountains of central Mexico. It is not fully hardy in this country but in warmer climates, where it has been introduced this plant can become an invasive nuisance.

As you leave the Garden via the **Top Lawn** look out for the **Snowy River Wattle, *Acacia boormanii***. This wattle is distinctive because of its very narrow, grey-green leaves (technically these are phyllodes or flattened petioles). As its name suggests, in the wild it is confined the catchment of the Snowy River in south-eastern Australia. It is not often seen in UK gardens.



Left: Velvet Groundsel, *Roldana petasitis*

Right: Snowy River Wattle, *Acacia boormanii*

We hope you have enjoyed hunting out 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.