Some botanical highlights in the Gardens in June

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** and the **Olive Grove.** 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. 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.

Just after passing through the Fig Pergola, if you look to the right you will see 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** is now full of colour. Osteospermums, Pelargoniums, Calla Lilies, Red-hot Pokers, Euryops and Gazanias are all in full bloom. Look out also for the large golden yellow spikes of ***Blood root Wachendorfia thyrsifolia.*** The English name refers to the red colour of the roots. It grows in marshy places in South Africa. The flowers produce abundant nectar which most insects, including honey bees, can get to easily without going anywhere near the pollen or stigmas. This is no help to the plant, which needs to use insects to pollinate the flowers. The insect which effectively pollinates the flower must be large so that it comes into contact with the pollen and

stigmas but to date the insect pollinator is unknown. The hard black seeds are light and given that the plant grows by watersides in the wild, this is probably an adaptation for water dispersal.

Left: Mitique, *Podanthes ovatifolius* **Right:** Blood Root, *Wachendorfia thyrsifolia*

As you enter the **Australian Garden** you will see some of the many Bottlebrushes growing here. In Australia they are pollinated by nectar-feeding birds. The splendid bottle brush covered with creamy flowers 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. The brilliant **Crimson Bottlebrush** is ***Callistemon citrinus splendens,*** first introduced to Kew Gardens by the botanist Joseph Banks in 1789. There is also a beautiful pink flowered bush; this is a cultivar known as **Mauve Mist.**

As you wander further through the Australian Garden you will come across a number of bushes of **Tea Trees**, ***Leptospermum***, 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 is harvested by bees and used to make Leptospermum honey. In New Zealand, honey harvested from Leptospermum flowers is used to make manuka honey. At the end of your visit, you will come across a spectacular Leptospermum, a cultivar called 'Electric Red' growing on the Top Lawn.

Left: Crimson Bottlebrush, *Callistemon citrinus splendens* **Right:** Tea Trees, *Leptospermum spp.*

In the **Palm Garden** 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, there 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. Look also for the **Ichang Lemon, *Citrus ichangense,*** a large evergreen bush by the wall. This is the hardiest Citrus species in this country and ours is an original plant dating from Sir Howard Hillier's involvement in the Garden in the 1970s. Currently, it is bearing pinkish-white fragrant flowers. These will be followed by small green mandarin sized fruits which are not particularly edible.

From the Palm Garden, if you look up towards the Plantation Room Café, you will see a bush with stunning magenta tubular flowers. This is **Inca bells or *Cantua buxifolia*** and it is flowering particularly well this season. It was introduced to this country by a Cornish plant hunter, William Lobb and first flowered in May 1848, but, it is grown invariably 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. There are paths which will take you up close to this special plant.

Left: Ichang Lemon, *Citrus ichangense* **Right:** Inca Bells, *Cantua buxifolia*

The **Long Border** is now full of colour with plenty of showy plants. A fascinating plant 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.

As you walk down the path towards the Walled Garden, you cannot fail to notice that the tall **Cabbage Palms, *Cordyline australis*** from New Zealand, are producing large panicles of small, fragrant creamy flowers. They make a spectacular show and the flowers are alive with visiting insects. Moths are attracted to by the aromatic compounds contained in the nectar. These heads of flowers will be followed by white berries which are most attractive to birds. Each time the plant produces a flower head, it leads to the stem branching which is why our plants have become multi-headed.

Left: Dragon Arum, *Dranunculus vulgaris* **Right:** *Cordyline australis* flowers

The **Mediterranean Garden** 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. We grow several species of Mediterranean sage bushes but perhaps the most striking at the moment is the **Turkish Sage, *Phlomis russelaniana.*** This is a tall, long-flowering plant with pale yellow hooded flowers and rather sticky leaves.

Left: Mediterranean Garden in flower **Right:** Turkish Sage, *Phlomis russelaniana*

Look beyond the tall blue Echiums for a smaller Echium growing in the Mediterranean Garden with pale flowers, hairy grey stems and a pyramidal shape. **Italian Viper's Bugloss, *Echium italicum,*** is not often seen in gardens as it is not particularly showy. It is found not just in Italy but throughout the Mediterranean basin. Another rarely grown wild Mediterranean plant with more showy flowers can be found in the bed at the foot of the steps leading up to the Tropical House. This is the **Spanish Snapdragon*, Antirrhinum controversum***. It is one of a group of very similar Spanish snapdragons growing in rocky limestone areas.

Left: Italian Viper's Bugloss, *Echium italicum* **Right:** Spanish Snapdragon, *Antirrhinum controversum*

In the **Arid Garden,** above the far end of the Tropical House, you can find a fine specimen of the **Chinese Bean Tree, *Catalpa fargesii.*** This small tree is has showier flowers than the more often cultivated Indian Bean Tree. They are lilac with brown and orange spotted throats. The plant comes from western China. Ours is the form *duclouxii* with less pubescent leaves with more conspicuous acuminate leaf tips.

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.

Left: Chinese Bean Tree, *Catalpa fargesii* **Right:** Spiral Aloe, *Aloe polyphylla*

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 large Puyas come from montainous regions but there is another group of smaller plants from the coast, where the climate is Mediterranean. You can see a selection of these smaller Puyas growing on the bank besises the lower path of the Arid Garden.

Do look for the most unusual plant growing just outside of the **Tropical House**. It is **Johnson's Grevillea (*Grevillea johnsonii)*** 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 are4 suffering as a result.

Left: Coastal species of *Puya*

Right: Johnson's Grevillea, *Grevillea johnsonii*

Before you leave, there are many interesting plants growing around the **Top Lawn.** The red flowered *Leptospermum* 'Electric Red' has already been referred to. As you enter the Top Lawn, on your right look for a magnificent flower of **Heath-leaved Banksia, *Banksia ericifolia.*** This was one of the original Banksias species to be collected by Joseph Banks around Botany Bay in 1770 and was named by Carl Linnaeus the younger in 1782.

Another interesting bush, flowering on the right hand side of the path is the**Tick Bush, *Kunzea ambigua.*** Remarkably, this was one of the first species of Australian plant to be introduced into cultivation in this country, although it is rarely seen today. The strange name Tick Bush is believed to refer to its use by bush men as an insect repellent. The leaves are full of aromatic oils.

Left: Heath-leaved Banksia, *Banksia ericifolia*

Right: Tick Bush, *Kunzea ambigua*

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.