

## Some botanical highlights in the Gardens in August

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

The Garden is looking splendid at the moment. If you haven't visited for a while, do come and enjoy the colour and spectacle.

On entering the Garden, enjoy the flowering lavenders and myrtle bushes in the **Medicinal Garden (2)** and look up for ripening figs as you walk under the Fig pergola. The **Common Myrtle (*Myrtus communis*)** is a medium sized bush with small aromatic evergreen leaves and, at this time of year, masses of fragrant creamy flowers with long stamens. This plant has been used for centuries for its culinary and medicinal properties, to extract essential oils for use in soaps and perfumery and as an aromatic flavouring in cooking. In parts of southern Spain, the leaves are used to help alleviate colds and bronchitis. Myrtle is also regarded as a symbol of love and is still used in bridal wreaths. Indeed, myrtle from plants grown at Osborne House was used at the wedding of Queen Victoria and Albert's eldest daughter, Victoria, and since then, myrtle from the same bush has been used in most royal brfidal bouquets. Opposite the bush in the Medicinal Garden you can also see the smaller flowered variety, *Myrtus communis tarentina* in its variegated form.



**Above left:** Common Myrtle, *Myrtus communis*

**Above right:** Variegated Myrtle, *Myrtus communis tarentina*

As you enter the **South African Terrace (3)** you will be struck by the display of African Corn Lily or *Agapanthus*. Many of ours are the more tender evergreen forms which originate principally from areas with winter or year round rainfall, such as the East and West Cape. Many are hybrids derived from *Agapathus praecox* but the identification of different species and hybrids is tricky. The deciduous species originate from areas with summer rainfall. *Agapanthus* is a plant considered to have both magical and medicinal properties by some native Africans. In some warmer parts of the world where *Agapanthus* has been introduced, it has become an invasive species and here in the Gardens the forms known as 'Ventnor Hybrid' and others grow freely from seed and are themselves starting to become invasive.



**Above:** African Corn Lillies, *Agapanthus praecox* and hybrid



The South African Terrace is currently a feast of colour with a huge range of plants in flower. In addition to Agapanthus, there are Pelargoniums, Osteospermums, brightly coloured Arctotheca and Gazania daisies, Pineapple Flowers (Eucomis), Bugle lilies (*Watsonia*) and Crocosmias, each represented by different species and cultivars. These are all South African plants which thrive outside here.

The leafy clumps of plants bearing heads of drooping pink lilies are **Swamp Lilies**, *Crinum moorei* and the hybrid ***Crinum x powellii***. As the English name suggests, in their native South Africa, these plants occur in damp, marshy areas, often in large colonies in the shade. The bulbs were used in traditional medicine for urinary tract infections and to treat cattle. The flower's scent is stronger in the evenings, suggesting that the plant is pollinated by moths.

Further along, by the pathside on the left, you will see the succulent **Red Crassula**, ***Crassula coccinea***, which occurs naturally on rocky outcrops in the South Cape. The brilliant red flowers are pollinated by a striking large butterfly called the Table Mountain Beauty. The flower was named by the botanist Rudolph Marloth and he explained that 'the dazzling brightness of the flower is principally due to the dome-shaped form of the epidermal cells, each acting like a combination of a convex lens with a concave reflector.'



**Above left:** Swamp Lilies, *Crinum x powellii*

**Above right:** Red Crassula, *Crassula coccinea*

In the **Australian Garden (4)**, take a detour down the steps beyond Bob's Bridge into the cool shade of the Tree Fern Gully. This is one of the finest examples of a mixed age tree fern population in this country. As well as big mature trunks and smaller trees there are self-regenerating sporelings. They are all the **Soft Tree Fern**, ***Dicksonia antarctica***, which is native to damp, sheltered woodland slopes and moist gullies in eastern Australia from southeast Queensland down to Tasmania. Ours were planted in 2005 from a mixture of specimens imported under licence from Tasmania together with younger plants from Logan Gardens in Scotland. At the time, imported trunks arrived with other plants growing on them and, if you look carefully, you may spot rare epiphytic ferns thriving on the trunks of some of the older specimens. Beyond here, in the triangular bed, look out for another species of tree fern, the **Rough Tree Fern**, ***Cyathea australis*** growing in the triangular bed by the path. This species has a similar range to *Dicksonia* and the two are often found growing together.



**Above left:** Soft Tree ferns, *Dicksonia antarctica*

**Above right:** Epiphytic ferns on tree fern trunks



If you venture down to the Americas Collection below the Australian Garden, you will find lots of trees of **Chilean myrtle, *Luma apiculata*** loaded with white flowers. This evergreen, with fragrant flowers, is a native of the central Andes where it grows in temperate rain forests. It is a New World relative of the Myrtles you saw in the Medicinal Garden. The flowers are important for honey production and locally the plant is used medicinally. The flowers are followed by fleshy fruits containing seeds which germinate freely around the mature trees. The leaves are fragrant when crushed. A particular feature of the plant is the delightful cinnamon coloured bark which exfoliates to reveal creamy patches. Luma is an old Marpuche Indian word referring to the orange colour of the bark.

Also here, are two trees of the **Chilean Lantern Tree, *Crinodendron patagua***, best viewed from the path leading from the Australian Garden down to the Americas collection. This is another tree from the temperate rain forests of Chile and it has a number of uses. The fringed white hanging lantern-like flowers are important for honey production and the wood is used in furniture making. The bark contains tannins and is used for tanning leather.



**Above left: Trunk of Chilean Myrtle, *Luma apiculata***      **Above right: Chilean Lantern Tree *Crinodendron patagua***

If you miss the Americas collection then you will probably pass through the **Hydrangea Dell (5)**, currently full of flowering Hydrangeas. This garden had become very shady and the Hydrangeas were flowering poorly but, more recently, some tree removal has brought more light into this part of the Garden and the Hydrangeas responding to this. As you pass under the stone archway, look to the left at the floriferous tree with fragrant white, five-petalled flowers. This is a **Lacebark tree, *Hoheria lyallii***. There are five species of Lacebark Tree, all confined to New Zealand, and several are grown in the Garden. The bark was used by Maoris as a source of fibre for making ropes.

As you make your way towards the **Palm Garden (7)** you will see large clumps of Ginger Lilies coming into flower on the bank to your right. These are the **Himalayan Spiked Ginger, *Hedychium spicatum***, a species native to the Himalayas where plants are used medicinally. The rhizomes are gathered and dried before being ground into a powder. In Indian medicine the plant is considered to be useful in the treatment of swelling, asthma, fever, and pain.





**Above left:** *Hoheria lyallii*



**Above right:** Himalayan Spiked Ginger, *Hedychium spicatum*

There is a particularly exciting find growing amongst the Ginger shoots and you may need to part the shoots to see it clearly. This is our oldest **Japanese Sago Palm, *Cycas revoluta*** in the Garden, planted here in 2007. Native to southern Japan, the pith of this plant is used in the production of sago after undergoing rigorous washings to remove natural toxins. Cycads are not palms; they are much more primitive plants related to conifers. Indeed, their fossil record dates back to the Permian period, some 280 million years ago, and they were certainly around when dinosaurs ruled the earth. What makes our Cycad very special is that it is producing a large cone in the centre of the plant. There are male and female plants and we now know that this one is male. Cycads are rarely grown outside successfully in this country and this is only the **SECOND TIME** that a cycad grown outdoors in the UK has produced a cone. The first time was also here in the Garden, on a different male plant in 2012. It is a clear indication that hotter summers and milder winters are triggering this phenomenon. Perhaps in twenty years time, coning Cycads grown outdoors will become commonplace.

Nearby, on the **Campsis Arbour**, the **Trumpet Vines, *Campsis radicans***, are flowering spectacularly this year as a result of a combination of hot summers, which they love, and the removal of trees which were providing too much shade. This vigorous woody vine is a native of the eastern United States where the flowers are very attractive to hummingbirds. Several cultivars are grown on the pergola providing a variety of attractive colour forms. *Madame Galen* has orange red flowers, *atrosanguinea* produces dark purplish red flowers, *flamenco* has red flowers and *flava* has yellow flowers.



**Above left:** Japanese Sago Palm *Cycas revoluta* with male cone **Above right:** Trumpet Vine, *Campsis radicata*  
Flamenco



In the **Mediterranean garden (10)**, the striking tall yellow daisy-flowered plants are **Elecampane, *Inula helenium***. This is a widespread European plant, not specifically Mediterranean. The roots have many traditional medicinal uses, in particular for lung diseases and as an expectorant to loosen phlegm. In France and Switzerland it is used in the manufacture of absinthe. Also in the Mediterranean garden (10), the bushes of **Oleander, *Nerium oleander***, are flowering spectacularly this year. In many years, only a few flowers open but this year they are flowering well. There are bushes bearing pink flowers and another with white flowers. Oleanders are highly toxic ornamental shrubs widely cultivated in the Mediterranean. They have been grown since ancient times and feature in many of the Roman wall paintings in Pompeii. Alexander the Great in his military campaigns is said to have lost men as a result of eating meat skewered on the highly poisonous twigs.



**Above left:** Elecampane, *Inula helenium*

**Above right:** Oleander, *Nerium oleander*

In the **Walled Garden (13)** look out for an unusual hemp-like plant growing against the wall close to the bananas behind a bench. This is the **Cretan Hemp, *Datisca cannabina***, from Crete and Turkey. It is far from showy, producing long green stems bearing hanging tassels of small greenish flowers. It is one of the plants that has root nodules containing bacteria which are able to fix nitrogen from the air to turn into soluble nitrates which the plant can use. The magnificent Evergreen Magnolia, also known by the name of **Bull Bay, *Magnolia grandiflora***, comes into its own this month. There is one at the far end of the Walled Garden but compare it to the cultivar 'Charles Dickens' growing in the lawn alongside. Charles Dickens is a tetraploid of the Bull Bay, a form where the cells have doubled the number of chromosomes. This results in a larger plant with spectacularly large flowers and larger shiny leaves. These are followed by equally spectacular reddish fruits looking like cones. Magnolias are quite primitive. They were some of the first flowering plants to evolve, at the time that dinosaurs inhabited the earth. The flowers were adapted to be pollinated by beetles because bees had not evolved at this time. The simple flower structure and the cone-like fruits are indications of their primitive origins.



**Above left:** Cretan Hemp, *Datisca cannabina* **Above right:** Bull Bay, *Magnolia grandiflora* Charles Dickens



Opposite the entrance to the **VBG Studio (19)** you will see the **Sierra Madre Lobelia, *Lobelia laxiflora***, a low, shrubby plant from Central America carrying masses of orange tubular flowers. It grows along streambeds and canyons and is another plant which has flowers that are attractive to hummingbirds. Like other lobelias, it contains medicinally useful alkaloids.

As you leave via the Top Lawn, look to your left at the showy, creamy flowered **Tea Tree, *Melaleuca alternifolia***. Examine the flowers. Their fluffy appearance is due to bunches of stamens each with around 30 filaments spread out in all directions. However, it is the leaves which are particularly special on this Australian shrub. They are rich in oil and you can see oil glands on the surface of the leaves. Tea Tree has been used as an alternative medicinal treatment for more than a century in Australia and is now becoming more commonplace. Inhaling the oils from the crushed leaves is used to treat coughs and colds.



**Above left:** Sierra Madre Lobelia, *Lobelia laxiflora*

**Above right:** Tea Tree, *Melaleuca alternifolia*

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.