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.

In the **Medicinal Garden (2)**, on your right hand side you will a a showy bush covered with white flowers. This is a *Solanum* species, a member of the potato family, and it illustrates one of the challenges of managing a Botanic Garden. We have had it a long time. It is not hardy but it thrives with us. Unfortunately, we have no idea how it arrived and its country of origin. Without this information, we have found it impossible to name. *Solanum* is a large genus with representatives in all the warm continents.

If you walk through the Fig Pergola down the steps and turn to your right, you will see an autumn flowering pink lily, the **Belladona Lily**, *Amaryllis belladona* from the southwestern Cape. They are sometimes known as Naked Ladies because the flower stems appear to grow straight out of the stem. Strap-like deciduous leaves will be produced after flowering. In the wild, they flower prolifically after the native vegetation or fynbos has been burnt.



Left: A shrubby Solanum species

Right: Belladonna Lily, Amaryllis belladonna

The **South African Terrace (3)** continues to provide 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. Also you can see a group 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

Our **Japanese Sago Palm**, *Cycas revoluta*, is making the national headlines at the moment. Our oldest cycad in the Garden, planted here in 2007, can be found by the lower path leading to the Palm Garden, on the right hand side. 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 male cone in the centre of the plant. 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. Later on around the Garden you will meet our second coning Cycad, a female plant.

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: Japanese Sago Palm, Cycas revoluta, with male cone Right: Trumpet Vine, Campsis radicans

As you leave the courtyard with the waterlily pond, and head towards the Long Border, straight ahead of you is a palm tree. This is a **Jelly Palm**, *Butia capitata*, a native of Brazil, and it is producing fruits for only the second time. The name Jelly Palm relates to the edible fruit flesh which is fibrous, sweet and reminiscent of apricots. It is sometimes made into sweet jellies and jams. Currently, our fruits are still green and unripe.

As you walk down the Long Border, on the right look for a tall, white-flowered Impatiens. This is **Dyer's Busy Lizzie**, *Impatiens tinctoria*. It is a massive, lush Impatiens which is not fully hardy in this country. The Latin name tinctoria suggests that it has a value for its dye. Indeed, it is a popular dye plant in Ethiopia where it is commonly harvested from the wild. A red dye is obtained from the rootstock. It is also used medicinally.



Left: Jelly Palm, Butia capitata with fruits

Right: Dyer's Busy Lizzie, Impatiens tinctoria

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* 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** 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

Before you leave, make sure that you visit the **Arid Garden (16).** If you walk up the diagonal path between the palm trees, there is a low growing 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 step, seaside cliffs.

You have now arrived at our second coning **Japanese Sago Palm**, *Cycas revoluta*. This one is a female and you can see that the cone is quite different. Whilst the male cone looks rather like a giant pine cone, the female cone has large orange feather-like scales which contain the female ovules at their base. When it is ripe, the cone opens fully and, in the wild, it would be pollinated by either the wind or by insects. Insects transfer the pollen by when they are feeding on plant tissue but male and female plants need to be growing within 2 metres from each other. This is believed to be the first time that a female cycad has produced a cone outdoors in the UK and to have both male and female cycads producing cones is truly extraordinary. The trend of increased warming of the climate is proving to be favourable for this species.



Left: Ochagavia litoralis

Right: Japanese Sago Palm, Cycas revoluta, with female cone

Finally, don't forget to visit the **Tropical House (18)** to view the giant waterlilies. The Giant Amazonian Waterlily, *Victoria amazonica,* 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 to 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.