

Some botanical highlights in February in the Garden

Our Magnolias have just started to flower. When you enter the Car Park you will see the white flowers of *Magnolia campbellii* var. *alba* in the Hydrangea Dell. Always the earliest to flower of our tree Magnolias, the display will become increasingly intense and colourful over the coming weeks.



In the **Medicinal Garden**, near to the waterfall, you will see an early spring bush with fresh young leaves and hanging racemes of small white scented flowers. This is the **Oso Berry, *Oemleria cerasiformis*** (left below). Ours is a male bush but on female bushes, the flowers are followed by purple, plum-shaped fruits called Oso berries. Apparently, native American Indians used to chew the twigs and leaves as an aphrodisiac whilst other sources say that all parts of the plant are toxic!

The **South African Terrace** is looking colourful at the moment, with yellow mounds of *Euryops* bushes. These shrubby yellow daisy bushes have become regular winter flowerers with us. Also putting on a good show at the moment are the imposing bushes of **African Hemp, *Sparmannia africana*** (right below).



Left: Oso Berry, *Oemleria cerasiformis*



Right: African Hemp, *Sparmannia africana*

Also on the **South African Terrace**, look for some special members of the Proteaceae family, mostly tender southern hemisphere plants named by Carl Linnaeus, the father of classification, after the Greek god Proteus. Proteus was a deity who was able to change between many forms, apt for a group of plants known for its astonishing diversity and variety of flowers and leaves. On the Terrace you will see the scarlet bracts of *Leucadendron salignum* '**Safari Sunset**'. The scarlet bracts surround the flower buds. We have several plants growing in this part of the Garden. Below the Fig Pergola, look for a handsome silver leaved bush, *Leucadendron argenteum*. It is an endangered plant from the Cape Peninsular which, in the wild, will grow up to 7 metres tall but, in this country, is generally too tender to grow outdoor excepting on Tresco, Isles of Scilly. It struggles in coastal gardens in Cornwall where, although the climate is mild, the rainfall is too high to suit it. The silvery sheen on the leaves, produced by a dense covering of velvety hairs, shows up well in low winter sunlight. Encouraged by the survival of our specimen, over the last year we have introduced more plants into the South African Garden.



Left: *Leucadendron salignum* 'Safari Sunset'

Right: *Leucadendron argenteum*

As you walk through the **Australian Garden** you will see that the Wattles, or *Acacias* are now in flower. There are around 1000 different species in Australia. Many of the acacias when introduced into other parts of the world with Mediterranean climates can become invasive pest species. The majority of them have clusters of globular yellow fragrant flowers but they can differ considerably in their foliage. The most commonly grown wattle tree on the Island is **Mimosa**, *Acacia dealbata*. You can see one large tree as you leave the Australian Garden to enter the New Zealand Garden, by a wooden seat. It is flowering well this year. This species has the more typical feathery bipinnate true leaves. Look out also for the **Cootamundra Wattle**, *Acacia baileyana* with its abundant clusters of fluffy yellow flowers and beautiful fern-like foliage. A native from a very restricted area of New South Wales, Cootamundra Wattle was first described from a tree growing in Bowen's Park, Brisbane. Material from this specimen was sent by Mr F.M. Bailey to the veteran German-Australian botanist, Ferdinand von Mueller. He named it in 1888 in honour of the sender, so commemorating F.M. Bailey's pioneering work on the Flora of Queensland. Another showy species at the moment is the **Cascade or Wallangarra Wattle**, *Acacia adunca*. This one has the typical Acacia flowers but it is distinguished by long, narrow drooping 'leaves', technically phyllodes, which is quite different to the foliage of Mimosa. Its native distribution extends from the tablelands of southern Queensland to northern New South Wales.



Left: Cootamundra Wattle, *Acacia baileyana*

Right: Cascade Wattle, *Acacia adunca*

As you enter the **New Zealand Garden**, on your left you will see a striking Hebe bush with large white flower heads. This one is ***Hebe macrocarpa***. Being a native of North Island, New Zealand, it is not a hardy species but it is noteworthy for being winter flowering.

In the **Palm Garden** look out for large bush with flaking coppery bark growing behind the Tennis Hut. This is the **Tree Fuchsia, *Fuchsia excorticata***, the largest of its kind, growing up to 12m in the wild. It is one of three New Zealand species (most Fuchsias are New World plants) and in all but the warmest parts of its range, it is deciduous, as it is here in the Gardens. Look for the small bunches of hanging flowers borne directly on the stem and branches. They change in colour from greenish-yellow to purplish red and are rich in nectar. In New Zealand, this plant is a favourite of the introduced Australian Brushtail Possum which has wrought havoc to the natural ecosystems on New Zealand. Where Possums are present in high densities, they can completely defoliate bushes, after which the bushes die.



Left: *Hebe macrocarpa*

Right: Tree Fuchsia, *Fuchsia excorticata*

In the **Long Border**, against the wall, you will notice a bush bearing clusters of tubular red flowers at the ends of the stems giving a hint of warmer climes. This is ***Cestrum fasciculatum 'Newellii'***, a member of the Nightshade family from central Mexico. It is generally considered to be too tender to grow outside in this country. Half way along the Long Border, a flight of steps leads up to the Mediterranean Garden, opposite the tunnel entrance. Close by, you will see the New Zealand tree, ***Pseudopanax arboreus*** with its glossy leaves arranged in fans of five leaflets and its conspicuous clusters of purple fruits. This showy plant is common throughout New Zealand in lowland forest and open scrub. The Maori name Whauwhaupaku means five fingers. There is another bush at the far end of the Walled Garden.



Left: *Cestrum fasciculatum* 'Newellii'

Right: *Pseudopanax arboreus*

If you walk up the wooded path by the side of the Garden, you will notice several early woodland plants in flower. The Hellebores, *Helleborus orientalis*, are well known garden plants. Less often seen is a blue flowered plant from the Boraginaceae family which goes by the intriguing name of **Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Trachystemon orientale**. A native of Eastern Europe, it has a tendency to become invasive in gardens. The strange English name was given to plants whose flowers change colour over time indicating three generations side by side. The name was also sometimes applied to comfrey where the three flower colours, red, white and blue, were more obvious.



Left: Abraham, Isaac & Jacob, *Trachystemon orientale*

Right: Lenten Rose, *Helleborus orientalis*

In the flowerbeds in front of the **Tropical House (18)**, is an unusual scented flowering bush. Look for a tall willowy bush bearing drooping clusters of whitish flowers turning yellow on the insides. This is the **Honeybell Bush, Freylinia lanceolata**, so called because the sweetly honey-scented flowers are a good source of nectar. In the wild, it is found in moist areas such as along streams or the edges of marshes in South Africa. Its name derives from when it was first cultivated in Europe, in the garden of Count Freylinio outside of Turin in Italy in 1817, where it caused quite a stir. This plant used to be an irregular flowerer with us but in recent winters it has flowered prolifically.

As you leave the Garden, look for an interesting bush in flower on the right hand side of the path as you enter the **Top Lawn**. This is **Heath-leaved Banksia, Banksia ericifolia**. Its distinctive orange inflorescences contrast with the green, fine-leaved heathy foliage. This plant was one of the original Banksia species collected by Joseph Banks around Botany Bay, Australia, in 1770> Banks was a naturalist on James Cook's Endeavour and it was named in honour of him by Carl Linnaeus the Younger, son of Carl Linnaeus, in 1782.



Left: Honeybells, *Freylinia lanceolata*

Right: Heath-leaved Banksia, *Banksia ericifolia*

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. Look out also for the robins, one of which will probably visit you during your tour of the Garden.

