

Some botanical highlights in November in the Gardens

Most public gardens have closed down for the winter by the time November arrives but here at Ventnor the flowering season continues. There is a remarkable variety of showy half hardy plants still in flower and fruit. Come and enjoy the Garden during the quiet time of year.



As you walk down towards the Plantation Room Café, on your left you will see clumps of tough plants of *Fasicularia bicolor*, the so-called Hardy Bromeliad. At this time of year, some of the spiny rosettes are producing striking red leaves with, at their centre, a tight bunch of duck-egg blue flowers. This is a member of the Bromeliad family and comes from coastal forests in Chile where it grows in stony soil and also as an epiphyte on trees. The tough spiky foliage is a deterrent to grazing animals; even llamas will avoid them. We grow two types here. The narrow leaved form *canaliculata*, grows in coastal rain forests whereas the usual form grows in more open sites.

As soon as you enter the **Medicinal Garden**, you will start to see interesting flowers. The **Mexican Sage, *Salvia longistyla***, has spikes of fiery red flowers. The long tubular flowers are bird pollinated and the leaves, when crushed, have a smell of pineapple. The very intensely coloured lavender bushes in flower are ***Lavandula buchii var buchii***, a lavender which is endemic to the island of Tenerife on the Canaries. You will notice that the silvery leaves are deeply cut, almost fern-like and quite different to those of the lavenders we generally grow in our gardens. Both of the above plants are quite tender and unable to withstand more than the lightest touch of frost.



Above left: Mexican Sage, *Salvia longistyla*

Above right: Canary Lavender, *Lavandula buchii* var *buchii*

You may also notice an evergreen bush on the right hand side with white flowers. This plant is ***Solanum bonariensis***, a relative of the potato. The flowers are like those of potato but larger and much more showy. Solanum is a large genus of plants of up to 2,000 species ranging from food crops (potatoes and tomatoes), various ornamental and medicinal species, shrubs, trees and weeds. *Solanum bonariensis* is a native of South America which has been introduced and become naturalised in some Mediterranean countries. It flowers over a long period of time. Look also for the **Myrtle bush, *Myrtus communis***, in the central bed. This one is loaded with bluish fruits. The Myrtle is native across the Mediterranean region where it has a number of traditional uses in medicine, largely associated with the high levels of salicylic acid contained within the bark. The berries have a strong flavour, a little like juniper berries, but they are used in many Mediterranean pork dishes and, in Sardinia for making a liqueur called mirto which is sweetened with honey.



Above left: *Solanum bonariense*

Above right: Common Myrtle, *Myrtus communis*

From the South African Terrace, you can look across to the **Hydrangea Dell** where you will see a tree covered in red bitter-sweet fruits, looking rather like strawberries. This is **Bentham's Cornel, *Cornus capitata***, a beautiful evergreen tree from low elevation woods in the Himalayas. It has showy white flowers earlier in the year although, as with other dogwoods, the petals are actually four bracts surrounding the small flowers. This is not a particularly hardy species of dogwood but surprisingly, considering its origins in the Himalayas, it is very tolerant of exposure to sea winds. These are not to be confused with the scarlet strawberry fruits of the **Strawberry Tree, *Arbutus unedo***, which is having a good fruiting season this year. You can see Strawberry Trees loaded with fruits in the Mediterranean Garden and around the central courtyard with the pond. Notice also that these trees are also bearing clusters of waxy white bell-shaped flowers which will produce next year's fruit.



Above left: Evergreen Dogwood *Cornus capitata*

Above right: Strawberry Tree *Arbutus unedo*

Another very different but showy fruit can be found growing on the bank between the Hydrangea Dell and the Palm Garden. This is a Himalayan **Ginger Lily, *Hedychium spicatum***. Earlier in the summer, the clumps produced showy flowers. Now they are producing spikes of yellow capsules which open to exposure seeds covered by a succulent red aril. These are attractive to animals which eat them, thereby spreading the seeds.

In the **Palm Garden** , look for the **Yellow Angel's Trumpet, *Brugmansia Apricot Queen***, with its spectacular hanging yellow trumpet flowers. The night fragrant flowers of this South American plant are pollinated by long-tongued moths. Our plant was hit hard by the cold weather last year but has recovered and should continue to produce flowers outside into December.



Above left: Ginger Lily, *Hedychium spicatum*

Above right: Angel's Trumpet, *Brugmansia Apricot Queen*

At various places in the Garden you may notice bushy plants beginning to die back but covered with hanging stems of succulent black berries on bright pink stalks. This is a North American plant called **Pokeweed, *Phytolacca americana***. The berries are very attractive to birds but highly toxic to humans.

The showy tall bushes of yellow and white daisy flowers which you can see still flowering in the Mixed Borders, is a plant called *Bidens aurea* Hannay's Lemon Drop.



Above left: Pokeweed, *Phytolacca americana*

Above right: *Bidens aurea* Hannay's Lemon Drop

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The many varieties of Mexican woody Salvias continue to make a show. Because they survive outdoors here throughout the year, at this time of year they have formed large bushes, covered with blooms. A selection are illustrated below.



Top left: *Salvia guaranitica*; **Top right:** *Salvia involucrata bethellii* **Bottom left:** *Salvia confertiflora*; **Bottom right:** *Salvia Phyllis Fancy*

In the **Walled Garden** look for the **Willow-leaved Jessamine, *Cestrum parqui* Cretan Purple** (right below). The usual form of this Chilean shrub bearing clusters of yellow-green night-scented tubular flowers can also be seen here. Cretan Purple, an attractive colour form, originated as a cross between *Cestrum parqui* and *Cestrum elegans*. *Cestrum* is another member of the potato family, Solanaceae, and all parts of these plants are poisonous.



Above left: *Cestrum parqui*

Above right: *Cestrum parqui* Cretan Purple

You can see a very bizarre looking plant in the **Tropical House** at the moment. This is the Brazilian **Giant Pipe-vine, *Aristolochia gigantea***, a climbing plant producing huge maroon flowers a bit like pieces of meat. The colour and smell of these flowers trap unwary flies, which pollinate the flower before being released. Also flowering at the moment is ***Plectranthus Mona Lavender***, a South African hybrid bred in the late 1990s at Kirstenbosch which has become a popular plant worldwide for its long flowering period, grown outside in warmer climates and indoor as a pot plant elsewhere.



Above left: Giant Pipe Vine, *Aristolochia gigantea*

Above right: *Plectranthus* Mona Lavender

In the flowerbeds in front of the **Tropical House**, 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 Freylino outside of Turin in Italy in 1817, where it caused quite a stir. With us, it produces flowers right through the winter. You may have noticed other bushes of this plant growing in the South Africa Garden.



Left: Honeybells *Freylinia lanceolata*

Right: Mexican Buddleja, *Buddleja cordata*

If you follow the path in the Arid Garden up to the point where two paths intersect, you will find a huge bush in flower. This is a **Mexican Buddleja, *Buddleja cordata***, looking very different to the butterfly bush we are more used to seeing in our gardens. However, although the flowers are small they are fragrant. This plant contains secondary metabolites which are the subject of much research. Some people in Mexico use the leaves to treat tumours, abscesses, sores and burns and recent studies have shown that some of secondary metabolites produced by this plant show much promise in the treatment of cancers and a wide range of other disorders.

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.