

## SPECIAL PLANTS OF THE MONTH

March 2021

The two Australian natives in this month's selection are both from Qld and NSW. The bird catcher tree from coastal rainforests has very sticky fruits which can incapacitate small birds and lizards. It is also widely distributed in the Indo-Pacific from Madagascar and the Andaman Islands through SE Asia to Malesia and Polynesia.



See over page for map

\*An Australian native

- 1 ***Erythrina caffra*** South African Coral Tree Eastern South Africa  
This deciduous tree flowers on bare branches during winter and spring. The spectacular curved, scarlet petals are followed in early summer by slender, black, bead-like pods containing red seeds. A 'royal' tree, it is much admired and respected in Zulu culture, and is widely used in South African traditional medicine.
- 2 ***Haemanthus coccineus*** Blood lily, ox-tongue lily Southern Africa  
Under the coral tree is another 'deciduous' Southern African plant with impressive red flowers. The blood lily grows in winter rainfall areas of southern Africa and is dormant in summer. The flowers emerge from a large underground bulb in late summer to autumn, and are followed by two large tongue-shaped leaves.
- 3 ***Hibiscus* collection** Hibiscus  
*Hibiscus* is a genus of many species of herbs, shrubs and trees in the mallow family. Flanking the path are some of the many varieties of woody species including cultivars of the deciduous *Hibiscus syriacus*. The colourful flowers, with usually 5 overlapping petals, have a distinctive central column of stamens fused around a long, 5-lobed style. The many uses of hibiscus range from the use of flowers for making teas, leaves as vegetables, bark for making 'grass skirts and wigs, and fibre for rope and sails for boats.
- \*4 ***Pararchidendron pruinosum*** Monkeys' earrings Indonesia, Coastal North Qld to Illawarra NSW  
The unusual, colourful seed pods of this tall shrub from the legume family develop from globular clusters of tiny, greenish-white flowers (October to January) much like those of the closely-related *Acacia*. The pods (legumes) darken with age and will split when ripe to release the hard seeds within.
- 5 ***Leonotis leonurus*** Orange-lion's-ear, lions tail South Africa  
An easily-grown shrub with aromatic leaves, and bright orange flowers (or dry seed heads) in tiered whorls around the nodes of the square stems typical of the mint family (Lamiaceae). In its native range it attracts sunbirds and butterflies, which can easily access the copious nectar at the bottom of the tubular flowers.
- \*6 ***Pisonia umbellifera* 'Variegata'** Parapara, birdcatcher tree Cultivar  
Commonly known as the bird catcher tree for its sticky fruits, this handsome cultivar grows well in sunny positions with afternoon shade. It has attractive variegated leaves in shades of green and white and is from the same family as *Bougainvillea*. The parent species (see map overleaf) with its uniformly green leaves and elongate, sticky fruits can be seen all along the path north of the bottle tree in the Australian Forest.
- 7 ***Vitex agnus-castus*** Chaste tree Southern Europe  
A tree sacred to Hestia, goddess of hearth and home, its leaves were believed to act as an anti-aphrodisiac and were popular with Greek women performing chastity rituals, hence the common name. Extracts of the leaves and fruit, containing up to 50 essential oils, are sold nowadays as an alternative medicine for a range of female reproductive issues, but can cause severe side effects and interact with prescribed medications.
- 8 ***Dipsacus sativus*** Teasel Western, central Europe  
The common name teasel is modified from the Old English '*tæsel*' (to tease), because the dry, upright seed heads of this herbaceous perennial were once used as a natural comb to raise the nap on woollen cloth. In mass production they have been replaced by metal combs, but are still grown in Europe and the USA and used in the production of exclusive and expensive fabrics, mainly in Italy. *Dipsacus*, from *dipsa* (Greek for thirst) refers to the often water-filled 'cups' formed where the sessile (stalkless) leaves merge with the stem.
- 9 ***Gossypium barbadense*** Sea island cotton Peru, Ecuador  
Described in notes by Linnaeus as the "cotton encountered in Barbados", this tropical, frost-sensitive relative of commercial cotton is prized for its high-quality, long silky fibres. Its showy yellow flowers, with parts arranged essentially like those of hibiscus, are initially enclosed in a leafy, clawed epicalyx which also surrounds the fruit. The mature capsule (bole or boll) will open to reveal the familiar 'snowballs' of fibre.
- 10 ***Pachycereus pringlei*** Mexican Giant Cactus, Elephant Cactus North west Mexico  
*Pachycereus pringlei* is the tallest of the cacti reaching 10 to 18 metres or more. Individuals may take 50 years to reach maturity, usually at about 10 metres. A trunk with a diameter of one metre may have several erect arms of similar width and height. White, bat-pollinated flowers appear along the ribs of mature arms for only one night per year. Colonies of symbiotic bacteria in seeds and roots enable this giant cactus to establish on rocky sites with little or no soil, by fixing nitrogen and dissolving nutrient-rich igneous rocks.
- 11 ***Acer negundo*** Box elder, ash-leaved maple Eastern North America  
The shady tree growing beside the lake south of the Simpson Kiosk is an unusual member of the maple genus with compound leaves of 3-7 leaflets rather than the simple, lobed leaf familiar to all Canadians. The clusters of winged fruits (samaras) at the ends of the drooping branchlets identify this tree as a female.