

SPECIAL PLANTS OF THE MONTH

October 2021

The plants in this month's selection come from regions as far afield as the volcanic islands off the Atlantic coast of NW Africa, Central America, the Himalayas, Sri Lanka, China and South Africa. The first in the list is as close to home as the spectacular arid ranges to the north of Adelaide.



See over page for map

*An Australian native

- *1 *Codonocarpus pyramidalis*** Slender bell-fruit South Australia
One of 3 species in the genus, this tall, willowy, narrow-leaved species in the bed just north of the main entrance to the Goodman Building is now restricted to SA. Found as scattered individuals in the Flinders and Olary Ranges, it is under threat from goats and rabbits. Look for the bell-shaped fruits in the upper canopy. All three species in the genus are fast-growing, short-lived, and more common after fire.
- *2 *Doryanthes palmeri*** Giant spear lily SE Queensland and NE New South Wales
The flowering stem of the giant spear lily emerges from dense rosettes of sword-shaped leaves up to 3m long. Initially erect, the 4-5 metre stem often droops under the weight of its long spear-shaped cluster of red flowers. The only other species in the genus can be seen in the beds on the eastern side of the Museum of Economic Botany. *Doryanthes excelsa* (gymea lily) has a bowl-shaped cluster of red flowers at the top of a vertical flowering stem. The long, durable leaves of both species are used for open weaving.
- *3 *Acronychia littoralis*** Scented acronychia Fraser Island, Qld to Pt Macquarie, NSW
Opposite the trellised roses on the western boundary of the Rose Garden, this small, rainforest tree from the citrus family has long, glossy leaves dotted with oil glands which release a pleasant scent when crushed. Its 4-lobed, creamy-yellow fruit, from a summer-flowering, also have a lemon smell and taste. Growing only within 2 km of the coast, its survival is endangered by a range of human and other environmental threats.
- 4 *Bartlettina sordida*** Blue mist flower Mexico, Guatemala
Beneath the tall pecan tree at the eastern end of the Classground, *B. sordida* with its large, rough leaves is part of a collection from the daisy family. Native to the high-altitude cloud forests of Central America, it has large, terminal clusters of flowerheads in shades of lilac to blue. In full bloom, the fuzzy flowerheads are said to resemble bursting fireworks. Nearby are the yellow flowerheads of a daisy related to the common sow thistle. Perhaps less spectacular than blue mist flower, though still very attractive to butterflies and bees, *Sonchus congestus*, is a tall, potentially invasive, perennial herb endemic to the Canary Islands.
- 5 *Cinnamomum zeylanicum*** (now *C. verum*) Ceylon cinnamon Sri Lanka and South India
Cinnamon, one of the oldest known spices, comes from the dried inner bark of small trees (to 15m) that can produce for up to 50 years. Most commercial production is from other species of *Cinnamomum*, but Ceylon or 'true cinnamon' is valued as the most delicate and complex of the cinnamons. Cinnamon oil, from the leaves, has a wide range of medicinal properties. The adjective 'zeylanicum' means 'of Ceylon'.
- 6 *Musa* spp.** Himalayan and Japanese bananas South and East Asia and SE Asia
At the western end of the Classground are several species from the banana family, including the edible *Musa velutina* from NE India, and the seedy, unpalatable Japanese banana *Musa basjoo* (originally from S. China). In contrast to the commercial bananas, these species are mainly grown as ornamentals, or for fibre. Nearby, is a large, clumping *Strelitzia alba* (Cape wild banana, white-flowered bird-of-paradise) from South Africa, looking very much like a banana. However, its fruit is a woody capsule and, unlike the false stem of the true bananas formed from tightly-rolled leaf-bases, its stems are robust, woody and unyielding.
- 7 *Taxus baccata*** English or common yew Europe, NW Africa, N Iran and SW Asia
The Latin name of this widespread, long-lived conifer loosely means 'toxic tree with berries', which is partly true, as all parts except the red, fleshy aril surrounding the mature seed are poisonous. The highly toxic leaves are the source of taxol, a drug used to treat solid tumours in humans. Yews are usually either male or female (both are present here) but some individuals have been known to change sex with time.
- 8 *Michelia figo*** (now *Magnolia figo*) Port-wine magnolia China
Originally named *Liriodendron figo* by a Portuguese missionary to Canton in 1777, the port-wine magnolia was imported into England as early as 1790. It is now grown widely as an ornamental and its fragrant flowers are used in the perfume industry. The chemical responsible for its scent, variously described as port wine, banana and even Juicy Fruit chewing gum, is also found in bananas and truffles.
- 9 *Solandra maxima*** Chalice vine, cup of gold Mexico, Caribbean, South America
Here growing through the canopy of a Moreton Bay fig, the gold chalice vine from Mexico was named for Daniel Solander, a Swedish botanist and student of Linnaeus. It is one of the toxic members of the potato family (Solanaceae), believed to have been used in ceremonial rituals by the Huichol people of Mexico.
- 10 The Mediterranean Garden** holds a collection of plants from Mediterranean climates across the globe including *Salvia aurea* (golden sage) from South Africa with yellow flowers which age to a rusty-brown and leave a persistent rust-coloured calyx when the petals fall. Towards the wisteria arbour are some striking blue-flowered species of *Echium*. One of these may be *Echium candicans* (the pride of Madeira). These conspicuous flower spikes are very attractive to bees, as are the salvias, although one South African website suggests that the flowers of *S. aurea* are too large for the efficient transfer of pollen by bees.