SPECIAL PLANTS OF THE MONTH March 2023

This month's list features three long-lived perennials which were planted early in the history of the Gardens, as well as two favourites, the dahlias and sacred lotus, which regenerate their above-ground parts each year. More information and beautiful pictures of the blue-banded bees mentioned at #1 and #10 can be found in Article 27 by Dr Anne Dollin at Aussie Bee Online.

See over page for map *An Australian native

1 Bee hotel **Under the canopy of the apricot tree on the north fence of the Kitchen Garden**
This little 'doll's house' was designed to house native solitary bees. Up to 25 different types of nesting materials are installed in the hotel, providing a range of diameters and depths to suit a number of local species. Many native bees are active in pollinating exotic, native and crop plants, eg the blue-banded bees at site 10 which show promise as buzz-pollinators of glasshouse tomatoes.

2 *Dahlia* Garden Mexico, Central America
This collection of dahlias, is just a small sample of the many thousands of registered cultivars. Dahlias are grouped by flower type in 14 named groups. Some of the more descriptive names are ball, pompom, waterlily and cactus (with pointed florets). You can find some brief information on management, origins, history and uses on signage inside the nearly century-old holm oak hedge around the beds.

3 *Hibiscus syriacus* Hibiscus Cultivars
The plants here are all cultivars of the common hibiscus a deciduous shrub to 3 m, tolerating a wide variety of conditions, including frost. Native to China and Korea, the parent species spread throughout Asia and was introduced into Europe in the 17th century. Botanists there described and named the species from material originally collected from gardens in Syria. *Hibiscus syriacus* is the type species for the genus.

4 *Nelumbo nucifera Sacred lotus, Indian lotus Southern and SE Asia, Australasia
The beautiful flowers, leaves and north-facing seed heads are a popular annual display but sacred lotus also has religious and cultural significance for people in the region. The rhizomes, seeds, flowers and leaves have long been used as vegetables and increasingly for their medicinal and therapeutic potential. Other interesting features include flowers which maintain a temperature suitable for insect pollinators, and hydrophobic, self-cleaning leaves which shed water droplets along with any dirt which might clog the pores.

5 *Bursaria spinosa Christmas bush (SA and Tas.) NE Qld around the coast to Eyre Pen,, SA
Usually a small to medium shrub covered in open panicles of fragrant white flowers in summer, Christmas bush may grow as a small tree to 10 m in wetter parts of its range. Although the species is native to the area, this old tree is thought to have been planted in the 1850s, not long after establishment of the Gardens. Unbalanced by recent loss of a limb, it is supported by a prop designed for otherwise healthy but overly long and heavy branches. With proper support this significant tree should last several more decades.

6 *Quercus suber* Cork oak Western Mediterranean
One of the evergreen oaks, it is well-suited to our climate and will grow to about 15 metres. In its native range it has been grown commercially for its outer bark since antiquity. The cork is used for flooring, insulation, floats on fishing nets and, of course, as stoppers for wine bottles. Removal of bark every 7-8 years, is by hand as great care is needed to prevent damage to the regenerative layers beneath.

7 *Combretum decandrum (now *C. roxburghii*) Bushwillow India, Myanmar
It is likely that this intriguing specimen is the *Combretum* sp. listed in the 1859 catalogue of the ABG. In India it is described by foresters as a massive, woody twiner climbing high into the forest canopy. In the more open, sunny conditions here, perhaps stimulated by pruning, it has assumed a very different form, caged in by robust stems, sprouting from the ground and lower trunk, which climb into their own canopy.

8 *Ficus brachypoda* (**syn *Ficus platypoda)** Desert fig Northern and central Australia
Another early planting, this magnificent, spreading desert fig was planted in 1861. In some areas it may start life as a banyan (or strangler fig), but under this impressive dome it is easy to see why even a lesser canopy providing tools, shade and shelter might be sacred to Aboriginal people living on country. The figs were an important source of food, either raw or dried and ground into a paste and eaten with water or honey.

9 *Lysiphyllum carronii Queensland bean, red bauhinia Mainly Queensland
Once classified as a *Bauhinia*, it is included here for its elegant, compound leaves, each with just two pale-green leaflets which contrast with the generally hard-leaved, or semi-succulent foliage of the surrounding vegetation. There is not much evidence of recent flowering or fruiting here, but the copious nectar from its red, pea-flowers was once used to prepare a sweet drink by aboriginal people in Queensland.

***10 *Callistemon salignus* 'Great Balls of Fire'** Willow bottlebrush Cultivar
This Australian cultivar was selected for the pink and red hues of new growth set against the lime-green of older leaves. It is easy to grow in a wide variety of climatic conditions, responds well to heavy pruning, and is often grown as a border hedge or shaped into a rounded bush. While you are here, take a moment to look for the **blue-banded bees** recently seen emerging from the old stone wall nearby. They have a characteristic 'hover and dart' flight pattern. The bees are solitary, but may nest close to each other, leaving an egg at the end of each tunnel with a nectar and pollen mixture for the emerging larvae.