SPECIAL PLANTS OF THE MONTH November 2023

In this month's list are a number of plants which might be called impressive, or notable at least, for either their size, seed production, perfume, spines and so on. On the other hand, however impressive they might be in a garden setting, some have become serious environmental weeds in the bush, with impacts on both Australian native flora and fauna.

See over page for map *An Australian native

1 Araucaria *cunninghamii Hoop pine Coastal rainforests of eastern Australia, PNG
Measured in 2019 at over 46 m, this tall, straight-trunked conifer, with characteristic tufts of foliage at the ends of its upswept upper branches, is the tallest tree in the Gardens. Its cones disintegrate at maturity releasing edible seeds, highly favoured by sulphur-crested white cockatoos. Native stands on the east coast were much-reduced by harvesting for the plywood industry, but it is now grown in plantations.

2 *Prunus lusitanica* Portugal or Portuguese laurel SW Europe, Morocco
A large evergreen shrub or small tree from the rose family, Portugal laurel has dark-red shoots and deep-green leaves which resemble those of its namesake, the bay laurel. Long racemes of small, fragrant white flowers are followed by dark-purple fruits, edible when fully-ripe, but otherwise bitter and toxic. It is widely naturalised in temperate zones and considered a weed in NSW and Victoria. Lusitania was the name of a Roman province roughly corresponding to modern Portugal.

3 *Cinnamomum camphora* Camphor laurel Southern and Eastern Asia from Korea to Vietnam
Planted in 1870, this impressive tree from the family Lauraceae is on the National Trust Register of South Australian significant trees. At this point we haven't measured our specimen but they clearly grow very large. In the grounds of a Japanese temple, a camphor laurel said to be 1500 years old has a girth of over 24 m. Across its range it was grown for its fragrant, insect-repellent timber, and as a source of camphor once used as a spice and in medicine. It was Introduced to Australia in 1820 and is now a serious invasive weed in the eastern states, suppressing and outcompeting native species especially after bushfires.

4 *Ficus obliqua Small-leaved fig Eastern Indonesia, PNG, eastern Australia, SW Pacific
Ficus obliqua is a large shady tree (15 to 60 m) with smooth bark, a buttressed trunk and a broad canopy of smooth dark-green leaves. Male and female flowers (and later tiny fruitlets) line the inside of the small yellow figs, attracting birds and flying-foxes which disperse the seed. In the wild a seed may germinate in soil, or start life as a strangler fig if it ends up in the canopy of another tree and sends roots to the forest floor. They were once considered sacred in Fiji where many of its parts were used in traditional medicine.

5 *Acer negundo* Box elder, ash-leaved maple Eastern North America
Growing on the fenced platform beside the lake, ash-leaved maple has compound leaves with 3-7 leaflets, quite different from the familiar palmately-lobed maple leaf on the Canadian flag. A fast-growing, short-lived species it has separate male and female plants - this one a female with clusters of V-shaped pairs of young samaras (winged fruits) at the ends of the branchlets. Fruiting is prolific, and at maturity the highly-viable seeds within are spread widely on the wind, so the species has become a pest in many countries.

6 *Alluaudia procera* Madagascar ocotillo Madagascar
Now flowering in the NE quarter of the Palm House, *Alluaudia procera*, from the family Didieriaceae, has a common name borrowed from a spiny desert plant, *Fouquieria splendens*, on the other side of the world. The two species look remarkably similar when young, perhaps an example of convergent evolution of different species growing in similar environments. Since its restoration in the 1990s this 1877 glasshouse has held a collection of plants from Madagascar, many from the arid, spiny forests of the south-west which are poorly-preserved and under threat from fire, and harvesting for charcoal, firewood and construction.

7 *Fouquieria* spp. Ocotillos Sonoran and Chihuahuan Deserts of SW USA and NW. Mexico
At the top of the northern stairs to the Palm House are two spiny species of *Fouquieria,* the type genus for the North American family Fouquieriaceae. Tall, robust stems of *F. diguetii* (tree ocotillo) dwarf the smaller, unlabelled ocotillo with slender, cane-like stems beneath. In their native habitat, the orange-red flowers of these two *Fouquieria* species are pollinated by humming birds and carpenter bees. Ocotillo is Spanish for 'little torch', a reference to the flowers. Leaves are soon shed in dry times, and regrow rapidly after rain.

8 *Trachelospermum jasminoides* Star jasmine East Asia, SE Asia
The evergreen vines growing over the arches at the northern and southern ends of the Economic Garden are covered with intensely-fragrant, star-shaped white flowers. A valuable oil extracted from the flowers by steam-distillation is used in high end perfumery and, in a more dilute form from tinctured flowers, in Chinese, Vietnamese and Thai incenses. The vine on the northern arch is a cultivar (*T. jasminoides* 'Variegata')

9 *Morus alba* 'Pendula' White mulberry Cultivar
The ornamental cultivar growing on this arbour is most commonly grown for shade. The parent species, native to Asia, is the preferred food of silkworms and is widely cultivated there and elsewhere for use in the commercial production of silk. Another notable feature of this species is the pollen, which is expelled at velocities nearly half the speed of sound into air currents beyond the layer of still air (the boundary layer) around the plant. This feature is especially useful for dispersal of pollen by species naturally growing in sheltered environments.