

SPECIAL PLANTS OF THE MONTH

May 2023

Although the progress of autumn colour appears to be later than usual, with luck the persimmons, ginkgos and bald cypress will turn before the end of May. Fruits of many spring and summer flowering species, both native and exotic, can also be found in and around the Economic Garden.



See over page for map

*An Australian native

- 1 *Bauhinia galpinii*** Red or nasturtium bauhinia Eastern and southern Africa
Here an attractive shrub with orange-red flowers, red bauhinia often behaves more as a climber in its native bushveld. This specimen flowers for many months, but you can also find long, green seedpods (legumes), blending in with the pale-green 'butterfly-shaped' leaves. These angular fruits will slowly dry and split as they ripen. Linnaeus named the genus with its bilobed leaves for the Bauhin twins (Swiss botanists).
- 2 *Ginkgo biloba*** Ginkgo Temple gardens of China and Japan
Ginkgo, also known as maidenhair for its elegant leaves, is a tree native to China. Protected in temple gardens, it is the only surviving species in the ancient Order Ginkgoales, which first appeared 290 million years ago. A male (labelled) is growing on the north bank of the creek, but most trees in this little stand are female. Fermenting seeds of the females can be very smelly, and pollen from the males allergenic, but if you are there at the right time the luminous golden-yellow of ginkgo leaves in autumn pays for all.
- *3 *Xanthorrhoea quadrangulata*** Mt Lofty grass tree Endemic to South Australia
One of about 30 species of slow-growing, long-lived grass trees native to Australia this SA endemic can be found on ridge tops and rocky outcrops in the Mt Lofty and Flinders Ranges. Dense flower spikes (March - August) are a good source of nectar for many birds and insects, and the skirt of 4-angled leaves a refuge for fairy-wrens, scrub-wrens and small mammals. Aboriginal peoples had many uses for species in the genus, including leaf bases as food, the flower scape as a fire starter and the resin as an adhesive. Early colonists also valued the resin as a varnish and even for the manufacture of early gramophone records.
- *4 *Tristaniopsis laurina*** Water gum, kanooka Coastal areas of NSW, Qld, Victoria
This relative of the eucalypts grows along creek-lines and in sun-lit forest openings. It has laurel-like leaves, glossy dark-green above and paler below with many small oil glands. The bark is a light grey and sheds in thin papery ribbons. The close-grained timber is tough, strong and fairly light – ideal for use as tool handles, mallets, golf club heads and wooden screens. Our specimen is laden with small green capsules, each holding several flattened, winged seeds – fruit from the many small yellow flowers earlier in the year.
- 5 *Citrus bergamia*** Bergamot orange A hybrid from Calabria, Italy
A probable hybrid between *C. aurantium* (Seville orange) and *C. limon* (lemon) its fruit is edible, though quite sour, and has the colour of a mature lime. The rind is used in a range of products, like marmalade, vinegar and various pastries. Essential oil from the skin is used in perfumes, food, Swedish snuff and also to flavour teas named for Earl and Lady Grey, although apparently the teas were too common for their taste! The aroma of leaves and rind are said to resemble that of herbs (wild bergamots) from another family.
- 6 *Cyphomandra betacea*** Tree tomato, tamarillo, Sub-tropical regions of the Andes
Now *Solanum betaceum*, tamarillo is a small tree or shrub with edible fruit from the family Solanaceae. Clusters of 10 to 50 pinkish-white flowers eventually produce up to 6 fruits per cluster. They can set fruit without cross-pollination, but the fragrant flowers attract insects which improve fruit set. Its yellow, orange or red to purple berries are egg-shaped, with more and larger seeds than a tomato. The flavour is sweeter towards the yellow end of the range. The name tamarillo was invented for a marketing campaign in NZ.
- 7 *Diospyros kaki* 'Fuyu'** Japanese persimmon Cultivar
In the middle of each of the quadrants of the Economic Garden is a Japanese persimmon. These decorative fruit trees from the ebony family originated in China about 2000 years ago then spread to Japan and Korea. At this time of year their drooping leaves turn orange, red and yellow in a blaze of autumn colours. The fruit, edible as soon as it turns orange, has an apple-like texture which rapidly softens as it ripens further
- 8 *Sanguisorba minor*** Salad burnet Central Europe, Mediterranean, Turkey, Middle East
The leaves and shoots of this attractive herbaceous perennial are edible, and are best harvested before flowering, after which they become bitter. They can be eaten raw or cooked in salads, and used to flavour sauces, summer drinks and cream cheese. It is here in the Garden of Health because the leaves were once used to staunch wounds, a practice which has some support from studies of blood clotting.
- *9 *Solanum aviculare*** Poroporo (NZ), kangaroo apple New Zealand, east coast Australia
Another *Solanum* with edible berries, poroporo is an erect shrub to 4 m tall and grows on clay soils in rainforests, wet forests and rainforest margins. The berries are much smaller than those of the tamarillo and, in this case, poisonous when green but edible once they turn orange. They are cultivated in Russia and Hungary for the toxic alkaloid solasodine used in the production of steroid contraceptives.
- 10 *Taxodium distichum*** Bald or swamp cypress Swampy areas in SE America
In the Lake, opposite the fenced platform on the western side, is one of the few deciduous conifers, with flat sprays of yellowish-green foliage that turn russet-red in autumn. In its native range it can grow to more than 40 m tall, with a girth of 6-10 m. Recent research has put the oldest known individual at more than 2260 years, much the same as the Californian redwoods. This one, of course, cannot be older than 168 years.