As early as the 1830s ornamental trees were planted at Port Arthur. By 1838 the avenue leading to the Church from Tarleton Street was lined with young trees provided by the Governor of the day, Sir John Franklin. It was Commandant Champ who, in 1846-47, developed Government Gardens as an ornamental garden primarily for the enjoyment of the ladies of the settlement. The gardens were much admired and reached their peak in the late 1860-70s. After the closure of Port Arthur the gardens were neglected until reconstruction began in the 1990s. Here we provide details of some of the trees and other plants growing in Government Gardens, as well as elsewhere around the Historic Site. Some plants will be easy to identify all year round, whilst others may be tricky as they will not be in flower or have leaves at the time of your visit.

The usual afternoon walk was to be Government Cottage Garden where the officers’ wives, their children and nursemades used to assemble. They were charming gardens. Lovely green lawns and gay flower beds – even a fountain in the centre – all beautifully kept.’

E.M. Hall, 1871-74

Arum italicum (lords and ladies)

Although the flower of this plant cannot compete with the large white spathes of the more well known Arum lily that is popular in floristry (Zantedeschia aethiopicum), its attractive foliage and the bright red ‘fruit’ that develop after the flower finishes means it still has a place in woodland gardens. It was most likely introduced into the Commandant’s garden late in the 19th century.

Illus Credit – 4

Acanthus mollis (oyster plant, bear’s breeches)

Native to the Mediterranean region, oyster plant is very hardy and adaptable in frost-free areas and can become quite invasive. Its distinctive leaves are thought to be the design motif on the tops of Corinthian columns and this may well be one of the earliest known cultivated species of garden plants.

Illus Credit – 2

Aralia heterophylla (syn. A. excelsa) (Norfolk Island pine)

One of the staple trees in early colonial gardens, this plant is native to the small island in the Pacific Ocean after which it is named. The long straight trunks were originally thought suitable for ship masts, but the timber did not prove durable. Norfolk Island pines may well have been some of the first trees planted at Port Arthur for ornamental purposes and their distinctive foliage and stature make them a dramatic landscape feature. They were (and still are) popular as a potted specimen in colder regions of the world where they cannot be planted outdoors.

Illus Credit – 3

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Amaranthus belladonna (belladonna lily)

The other common name for this bulb from South Africa is the ‘naked lady’, which alludes to the way the plant sends the flower stalk up from its dormancy in the ground at the end of summer before any foliage emerges. In late February and throughout March, areas of the Port Arthur Historic Site are adorned with swards of this plant, and probably have been since the early days of the penal establishment.

Illus Credit – 5

Canna indica (Indian shot)

‘The Canna indica, a native of both Indies, is a plant greatly admired for the beauty of its foliage and flowers, and on account generally cultivated; it has been called by some Indian shot, from the roundness and hardness of its seeds...’


The common name of this plant relates to stories that the seeds were sometimes substituted for shot gun pellets by British soldiers stationed in India in the 19th century.

Illus Credit – 9
This plant, which is native to Mexico, is described as being ‘scarce in collections present’ in the 1847 edition of Porteous’s Magazine of Botany. It also claims that red Cestrum was introduced to Belgium in 1839 and passed on from there to the Royal Society of Horticulture in London. By 1857, it had made its way into Tasmania and is listed as growing in the Royal Society Gardens in Hobart. It was undoubtedly a fashionable plant to have growing in a garden at this time!

**Dahlia**

This fine species constantly rising in value by the production of fresh varieties of the richest and brightest colours, is becoming one of the most important for the plantation timber industry, because it is quick growing with a long, straight trunk.

**Dipsacus fullonum**

This illustration shows a stately pair of tree ferns, and forwarding them to him. It was undoubtedly a fashionable plant to have growing in a garden at this time!

**Dicksonia antarctica**

This illustration shows a stately pair of tree ferns in Government Gardens certainly seem to be flaunting this fact!

**Digitalis purpurea**

A native to western and southern Europe, including the British Isles. Commandant Chompe wrote a letter to his mother requesting her to collect the seeds of wild flowers when walking in the woods and send them to him.

**Eucalyptus globulus**

A native to the Mediterranean, this plant is included in the List of plants cultivated in the Botanic Garden Sydney that are used in commerce (1980–1981) and is included in the 1990–1991 catalogues in the 19th century are no longer known. **Dipsacus fullonum** (Teasel) is included in the flower division at the second exhibition of the Royal Society’s Gardens, Queen’s Park, Hobart Town, Tasmania (1845). The dragon Arum is native to the east Mediterranean. Its flowers are described as having the odour of rotting meat, and flies are its main pollinators.

**Euphorbia characias**

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In 1849, several scientific groups joined together to form the Royal Society of Tasmania for Horticulture, Botany and the Advance of Science, the first Royal Society outside of Britain. Members had connections with Kew Gardens and other nurseries. This society took responsibility for managing Hobart’s Government Gardens, later to become the Royal Tasmanian Botanical Gardens.

Among Royal Society members were numerous Port Arthur administrators and officials including Commandants William Champ and James Boyd. Many plants were ordered from England. Cuttings, tubers, corms, rootstock and seeds were also collected by plant enthusiasts on the eight-month journey to Van Diemen’s Land. The genes of some of Port Arthur’s plants map the ports of call in South America, South Africa and India. Boyd alone ordered hundreds of plants, including dahlias, marjoram and fruit trees.

“I have made a good garden for myself in which I mean to collect all sorts of plants, and have made a canal and erected a fountain. Some place of the kind was much wanted for the ladies of the settlement to walk in and I believe my garden is pronounced quite delightful.”

Commandant Champ in a letter to his mother, 1846
Myosotis sylvatica (forget-me-not)

The forget-me-not is so common in Tasmanian gardens that many people consider it weedy and tend to pull it out. A common flower in woodlands throughout Britain and Europe, this would have been one of the early introductions to the gardens in Port Arthur.

The following poem appeared in an April edition of the Launceston Courier in 1829, and captures the sentimentality that people at this time had for the forget-me-not:

There is a flower I know so well,
That grows within my garden wall,
My sailor put its name shall be,
The lovely blue ‘forget-me-not’.

It’s not within the rich man’s hall,
But near the honest peasant’s cot,
The sweet blue ‘forget-me-not’
Is grown with modest aims.

And should I die an early doom
Let no false tear my mem’ry blot;
And should I die an early doom
Let no false tear my mem’ry blot.

It does not want a warmer bloom,
The rose-bud’s glory ’t has not got;
It does not boast a rich perfume,
The lovely blue ‘forget-me-not’.

Where grows the lovely flow’r, we call,
But near the honest peasant’s cot,
The lovely blue ‘forget-me-not’
Of all the flowers, I do adore.

Let no false tear my mem’ry blot;
And should I die an early doom
Let no false tear my mem’ry blot.
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Rosa spinosissima (syn R. pimpinella)

The Scots rose, or Burnet rose, is native to a large area of Europe, including the British Isles, and also Asia. However, it wasn’t until the start of the 19th century that double cultivars were developed in Britain and Europe, this would have been one of the early introductions to the gardens in Port Arthur.

The following poem appeared in an April edition of the Launceston Courier in 1829, and captures the sentimentality that people at this time had for the rose:

The rose up to the Church are mostly English
And in many other sites throughout Australia and New Zealand, plants of Rosa Spinosa common to this country and New Zealand... a beautiful evergreen shrub, with dark-leafed leaves. It is covered with small round apples, which ripen easily into large fresh blue bananas, and a sort of yams grow at its root, it is both ornamental and useful.

Quercus robur (English oak, common oak)

The trees that surround Government Gardens and line the avenues up to the Church are mostly English oaks. This is the most common forest tree in Britain. The botanical name robur means ‘strength’ in Latin, and refers to the hard timber for which the trees have been valued since prehistoric times.

Sir John Franklin, the Lieutenant Governor of Van Diemen’s Land from 1836-43, provided the Tasman Peninsula with many oaks, and in the garden he planted a large number of oaks, elms, and willows. The oaks were planted as a hedge around the gardens and in the Royal Society’s Gardens, Queens Park, Hobart Town, in 1835.

The following poem appeared in an April edition of the Launceston Courier in 1829, and captures the sentimentality that people at this time had for the oak:

Quercus robur

The azure blue ‘forget-me-not’
Half-buried in the shade they grow,
And should I die an early doom
Let no false tear my mem’ry blot.

It does not want a warmer bloom,
The rose-bud’s glory ’t has not got;
It does not boast a rich perfume,
The lovely blue ‘forget-me-not’.

Where grows the lovely flow’r, we call,
But near the honest peasant’s cot,
The lovely blue ‘forget-me-not’
Of all the flowers, I do adore.

Let no false tear my mem’ry blot;
And should I die an early doom
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Solanum aviculare (kangaroo apple)

Native to North America and Canada, this plant is an herbaceous perennial, which means that it dies back to the ground after flowering in autumn, with new growth not emerging until the weather warms up in spring.

In the Catalogue of plants under cultivation in the Royal Society’s Gardens, Queen Park, Hobart Town, Tasmania (1967), the only species of golden rod listed is Solidago canadensis, which is probably an outdated synonym for S. aviculare. One of the challenges in restoring historic gardens is determining the correct variations of plants for which the names might have changed several times over the course of history.

Solidago canadensis (golden rod)

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Salix babylonica (weeping willow)

The weeping willows that once grew in this garden, and in many other sites throughout Australia and Britain, were taken as cuttings from a tree growing on the grave of Napoleon Bonaparte on the island of St Helena. A quick-growing shade tree popular for ornamental plantings, willows have also traditionally been used medicinally and for basketry.

In 1845, the Commandant of Port Arthur wrote in his journal that ‘the species... is an herbaceous perennial, which means that it dies back to the ground after flowering in autumn, with new growth not emerging until the weather warms up in spring.

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Solanum aviculare (kangaroo apple)

China roses were introduced into the west towards the end of the 19th century, and enabled the many cultivars of rose available today to be developed.

China roses have the quality of repeat flowering, although they bloom most heavily in the spring.

The roses growing in Government Gardens include ‘La Marius’, a variety released in 1838 with large, fragrant, white flowers.

Rosa chinensis (China rose)