



# GOVERNMENT GARDENS PLANT GUIDE

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 nursemaids used to assemble. They were charming gardens. Lovely green lawns and gay flower beds – even a fountain in the centre – all beautifully kept.'*

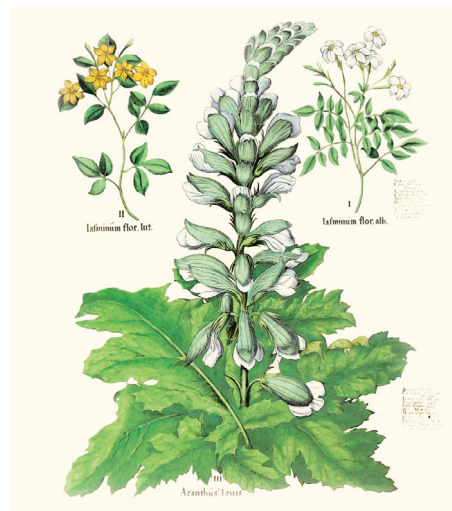
E.M. Hall, 1871-74



## *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 – 1



## *Amaryllis 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 – 2



## Above:

View at Port Arthur c.1860  
artist unknown

Allport Library & Museum of  
Fine Arts, State Library of Tasmania  
[12406485]

## *Araucaria 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



## *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



## *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...'*

William Curtis – *The Botanical Magazine*, vol. 13-14, 1799

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.

See left. Illus Credit – 5



*Canna indica* (Indian shot)





Cestrum elegans (red Cestrum)

This plant, which is native to Mexico, is described as being ‘scarce in collections at present’ in the 1847 edition of *Paxton’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!

Illus Credit – 6



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 general ornaments of our flower-gardens in autumn.’  
*Edward’s Botanical Register*, vol. 1, published London, 1815

A correspondent to the *Hobart Colonial Times* in February 1840 described ‘a very brilliant bouquet of these charming flowers; they were of every variety of colour assumed by the *Dahlia*’, which won the first prize of one pound three shillings in the flower division at the second exhibition of the Hobart Town Horticultural Society.

Many of the *Dahlia* varieties found in nursery catalogues in the 19th century are no longer known in cultivation.

Illus Credit – 7



Dicksonia antarctica (soft tree fern)

This illustration shows a stately pair of tree ferns growing in a glass conservatory amongst a collection of other fern varieties – the height of fashion in the Victorian era. One of the attractions of horticulture in the Australian colonies was the ability to cultivate plants in the open ground that could only be grown under glass in Britain. The tree ferns in Government Gardens certainly seem to be flaunting this fact!

The craze for collecting ferns is evident in the following accounts made by visitors to the Tasman Peninsula: ‘Twas here I first learned to take an interest in ferns, and made many excursions on subsequent visits to the peninsula, for the purpose of gathering young plants, and forwarding them to friends in Hobart.’

Dicksonia antarctica

Illus Credit – 8



‘Having an intimate knowledge of all the 35 or 40 varieties of ferns to be found on the Peninsula and of the localities in which they grew, his assistance was sought by all the distinguished visitors to Port Arthur and with the Commandant’s permission he was dispatched to the mountains, hills, and gullies after rare specimens which he alone knew where and how to obtain.’

Digitalis purpurea (common foxglove)

A native to western and south western Europe, including the British Isles. Commandant Champ 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.

Illus Credit – 9



Dipsacus fullonum (Fuller’s teasel, wild teasel)

This plant is included in the *List of plants cultivated in the Botanic Garden Sydney that are used in commerce [and] medicine* compiled by Charles Fraser in 1827, which notes that it had been growing there since 1820. The seed heads of teasel have been used for centuries in textile processing to comb and ‘tease’ the nap of woollen fabrics.

A native of Eurasia and North Africa, teasel tends to naturalise in temperate areas, and is becoming a noxious weed in some parts of Australia. This is true for many of the plants that were early introductions into the Australian colonies from other parts of the world with similar climates.

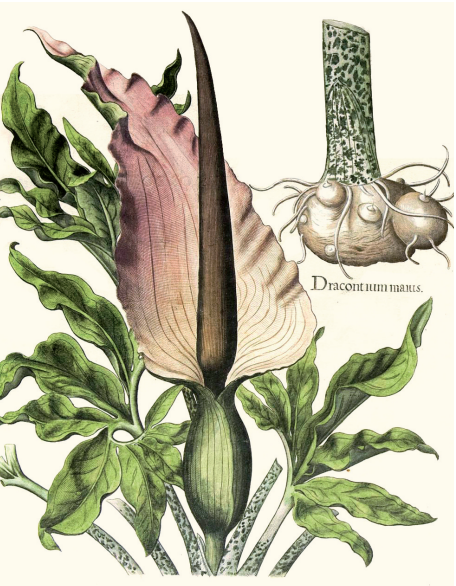
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Dracunculus vulgaris (dragon Arum, stink lily)

This plant was listed as *Arum dracunculus* in the *Catalogue of plants under cultivation in the Royal Society’s Gardens, Queens Park, Hobart Town, Tasmania* (1865). 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.

Illus Credit – 11



Eucalyptus globulus (blue gum)

‘...the blue gum (of which almost any quantity can be procured) is equal to English oak more especially on account of the great lengths that can be obtained; there is no difficulty in obtaining lengths of Seventy feet, and if required it could be got upwards of one hundred...’  
John Watson, Superintendent of government ship building at Port Arthur, 1849

Tasmanian blue gums are growing in several parts of Mason Cove. Some have been planted in rows and avenues, while others may even pre-date British settlement. At the highest point in Government Gardens are a ring of blue gums which probably date to the time when a summerhouse was located there. An attractive young tree with distinctive silver foliage, today the Tasmanian blue gum is important for the plantation timber industry, because it is quick growing with a long, straight trunk.

Illus Credit – 12



Euphorbia characias (Mediterranean spurge)

A native to the Mediterranean, this plant is included in the *Catalogue of plants under cultivation in the Royal Society’s Gardens, Queens Park, Hobart Town, Tasmania* (1865). The large, showy ‘flower heads’ of this species are actually a collection of leaf bracts that surround the tiny ‘true’ flowers. All plants in this family have a poisonous milky sap that can irritate the skin and eyes.

See right: Illus Credit – 13

1

Illustration Credits

- 1 Bessler, Basilius, *Hortus Eystettensis*, vol. 2: *Undecimus ordo collectarum plantarum aestivalium*, t. 277, fig. III (1640). Illustration contributed by Teylers Museum, Haarlem, The Netherlands.’
- 2 *Botanical Register*, vol. 9: t. 714 (1823). Illustration contributed by the Missouri Botanical Garden, USA.
- 3 *Araucaria columnaris* (Forster f.) Hook. [as *Araucaria excelsa* (Lamb.) R. Br.] Cook’s araucaria, New Caledonian pine, Norfolk Island pine. Step, E., Bois, D., *Favourite flowers of garden and greenhouse*, vol. 4: t. 235 (1896-1897) [D. Bois].
- 4 Bessler, Basilius, *Hortus Eystettensis*, vol. 1: *Secundus ordo collectarum plantarum vernalium*, t. 36, fig. I (1640). Illustration contributed by Teylers Museum, Haarlem, The Netherlands.
- 5 *Canna indica* L. [as *Canna limbata* Roscoe] Himalayan canna, India canna, *Botanical Register*, vol. 9: t. 771 (1823). Illustration contributed by the Missouri Botanical Garden, USA.
- 6 Houtte, L. van, *Flore des serres et des jardin de l’Europe*, vol. 2: t. 9 (1846) [n.a.]. Illustration contributed by the Missouri Botanical Garden, USA.
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- 8 *The garden. An illustrated weekly journal of horticulture in all its branches* [ed. William Robinson], vol. 10: p. 39 (1876). Illustration contributed by the University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries, USA.
- 9 Hamilton, E., *Flora homeopathica*, vol. 1: t. 29 (1852) [M.D.]. Illustration contributed by the Missouri Botanical Garden, USA.
- 10 Curtis, W., *Flora Londinensis*, vol. 3: t. 9[202] (1778-81)
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- 13 *Edwards’s Botanical Register*, vol. 24: t. 6 (1838). Illustration contributed by the Missouri Botanical Garden, USA.



Euphorbia characias (Mediterranean spurge)



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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.'*

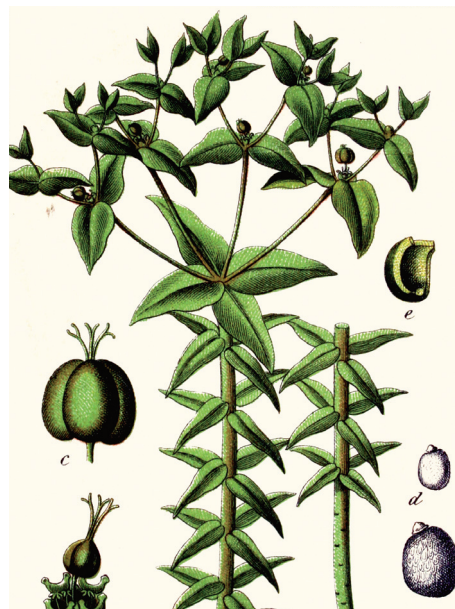
Commandant Champ in a letter to his mother, 1846



## *Euphorbia lathyris* (caper spurge)

Native to southern Europe, this plant is actually toxic to humans, even though the common name comes from the close resemblance of the seed to the edible caper. Caper spurge has naturalised in several of the gardens around the Site, and is likely to persist from the penal settlement era.

Illus Credit – 1



## *Glaucium flavum* (yellow horned poppy)

The short lived flowers of this plant, native to Europe, North Africa and the Middle East, are followed by a woody seed pod that can be up to a foot long!

See left. Illus Credit – 2

## *Hedychium gardnerianum* (ginger lily)

The ginger lily is native to the Himalayas in India, Nepal and Bhutan. Volume 9 of *The Botanic Register consisting of coloured figures of Exotic Plants cultivated in British Gardens; with their History and Mode of Treatment* (Edwards, Sydenham, 1823), claims that this plant had only lately been received into England from the Calcutta gardens. In England, this plant was grown in stove houses, where bottom heat enabled plants from the tropics to grow and flower.

Illus Credit – 3



## *Leonotis leonurus* (lion's tail)

Native to the south of Africa, this is another plant that would have been limited to indoor cultivation in most parts of Britain. In the Australian colonies it was able to be grown in the open ground, attaining a more impressive size and character than that of potted indoor specimens.

Illus Credit – 4



## *Lupinus polyphyllus* (garden lupin)

This plant was discovered in the north-west of North America in the 1820s by Mr David Douglas, who also introduced the Douglas fir to Europe. Seeds of 'blue and yellow lupins various' were being advertised for sale by Mrs Wood in the *Hobart Town Courier* by November 1829.

'This splendid lupine is now become so common that we can hardly conceive how gardens must have looked without it, though it is not yet quite twenty years that seeds of it were first sent to this country...'

*The Ladies' Flower-garden of Ornamental Perennials,*  
Mrs (Jane) Loudon, 1843

Illus Credit – 5



## *Melianthus major* (honey flower)

A common plant in colonial gardens, *Melianthus* would have been admired for its unusual leaves and growth habit, as well as for its large red flower spikes, unlike any plant found in traditional English gardens. It is native to South Africa, and was collected by sailing vessels on their way from England to the Australian colonies and other trading ports.



*Glaucium flavum* (yellow horned poppy)



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*Melianthus major*

Illus Credit – 6



## *Quercus robur* (English oak, common oak)

The trees that surround Government Gardens and line the avenue up to the Church are mostly English oaks. This is the most common forest tree in Britain. The botanic 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 Port Arthur Penal Settlement with young oak, ash and elm trees, some of which may survive today. Deciduous European trees were some of the earliest brought to the new colony, bringing a sense of comfort and familiarity in an otherwise foreign landscape.

Illus Credit – 7



## *Rosa spinosissima* (syn *R. pimpinella*) (Scots rose, Scotch rose, Burnet rose)

The Scots rose, or Burnet rose, is native to a large part 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 Scottish nurseries (varieties with more than a single row of petals).

The small flowers are followed by characteristically black rose ‘hips’ (seed heads). The stems are typically covered in bristles and prickles, and sucker to create a dense mounded shrub.

Illus Credit – 8



## *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 flow’r I love so well  
That grows within my garden plot  
My willing pen its name shall tell  
The lovely blue ‘forget-me-not’*

*’Tis not within the rich man’s hall,  
But near the honest peasant’s cot,  
Where grows the lovely flow’r, we call,  
The modest blue ‘forget-me-not’.*

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

*Through life I’ve lov’d this simple flow’r  
Nor ever be its name forgot  
In prosp’rous time or adverse hour  
The humble blue ‘forget-me-not’*

*And should I die an early doom  
Let no false tear my mem’ry blot;  
But let there spring around my tomb,  
The azure blue ‘forget-me-not’*

Illus Credit – 9



## *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 investigated which Tasman Peninsula outstations had suitable conditions to plant willows for basket-making, and supplied these with cuttings from his own garden.

Illus Credit – 10



## *Solanum aviculare* (kangaroo apple)

Thomas Lempriere, the Commissariat Officer at Port Arthur from 1833-48, wrote in his journal about the culinary value of various native plants. He stated: ‘the *Solanum*... or kangaroo apple, is a very handsome plant and the fruits, when perfectly ripe, pleasant to the taste’. – 1838

In 1828 the kangaroo apple was featured in an article in the *Hobart Town Courier*, which commented: ‘...we have had occasion, this season particularly, to remark the great luxuriance of what is called the Kangaroo apple, or New Zealand potato, a species of *Solanum* common to this country and New Zealand... a beautiful evergreen shrub, with dark verdant leaves... It is covered with small round apples, which when ripe eat exactly like bananas, and a sort of yams grow at its root, it is both ornamental and useful.’

Illus Credit – 11



## *Solidago canadensis* (golden rod)

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, Queens Park, Hobart Town, Tasmania* (1865), the only species of golden rod listed is *Solidago laevigata*, which is probably an outdated synonym for *S. sempervirens*. One of the challenges in restoring historic gardens is determining the correct varieties of plants for which the names might have changed several times over the course of history.

Illus Credit – 12



## *Rosa chinensis* (China rose)

China roses were introduced into the west towards the end of the 18th 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 Marque’, a variety released in 1830 with large, fragrant, white flowers.

See right. Illus Credit – 13

2

### Illustration Credits

- 1 Krause, E.H.L., Sturm, J., Lutz, K.G., *Flora von Deutschland in Abbildungen nach der Natur, Zweite auflage*, vol. 7: t. 33 (1902). Illustration contributed by www.BioLib.de
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*Rosa chinensis* (China rose)