



GOVERNMENT GARDENS PLANT GUIDE

'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

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.



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.

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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.

Illus Credit – 10



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)

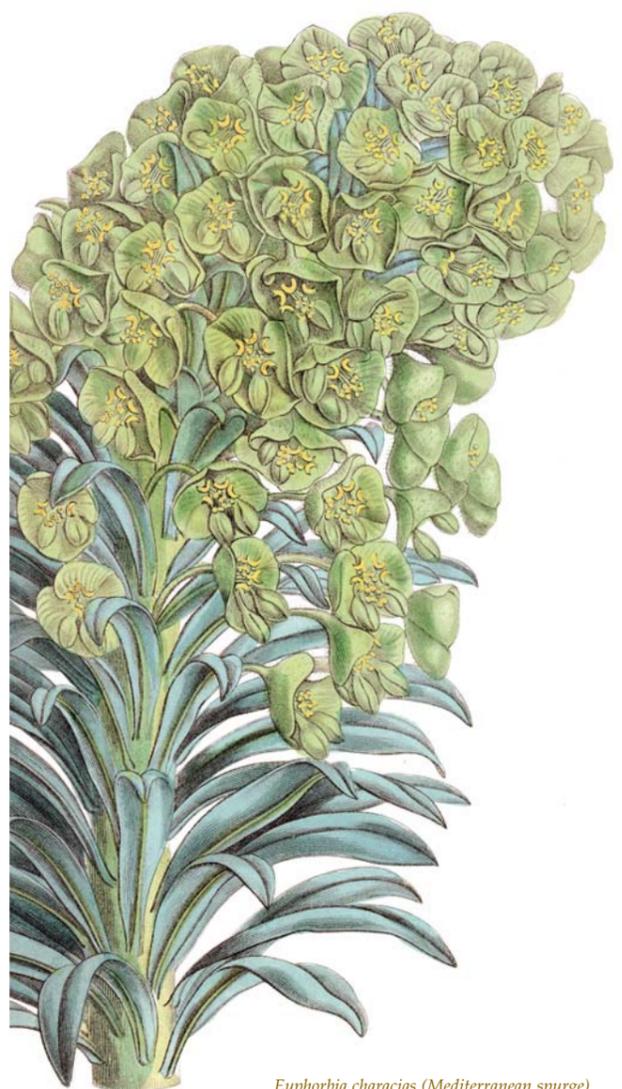
A native to the Mediterranean, this plant is included in the *Catalogue of plants under cultivation in the Royal Society's Gardens, Queens Park, Hobart Town, Tasmania* (1865). The large, showy 'flower heads' of this species are actually a collection of leaf bracts that surround the tiny 'true' flowers.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

See right: Illus Credit – 13

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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 jardins de l'Europe*, vol. 2: t. 9 (1846) [n.a.]. Illustration contributed by the Missouri Botanical Garden, USA.
- 7 *L'illustration horticole*, vol. 36: t. 94 (1889). Illustration contributed by the Missouri Botanical Garden, USA.
- 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 homoeopathica*, 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)
- 11 Sibthorp, J. Smith, J.E., *Flora Graeca* (drawings), vol. 10: t. 46 (1840). Illustration contributed by the Bodleian Library (University of Oxford), Oxford, UK.
- 12 Köhler, F.E., *Medizinal Pflanzen*, vol. 3: t. 40 (1890). Illustration contributed by the Missouri Botanical Garden, USA.
- 13 *Edward's Botanical Register*, vol. 24: t. 6 (1838). Illustration contributed by the Missouri Botanical Garden, USA.



Euphorbia characias (Mediterranean spurge)