

## A self-guided walk

March 2025

ABG



This month's list has some good examples of plant collectors giving 'new' plants names which reminded them, somehow, of a familiar species. Sturt's desert rose (#1) is not a rose, and the Illawarra plum (#4), a non-flowering plant so-named for a fleshy appendage to its seed, is definitely not related to the plums, nor is the appendage a fruit.

See over page for map

\*An Australian native

- \*1 *Gossypium sturtianum*** Sturt's desert rose Inland areas of mainland Australia  
In the beds adjacent to the Wine Centre carpark is a small stand of Sturt's desert rose, a woody shrub from the cotton family (Malvaceae), which grows on sandy or gravelly soils in dry watercourses, gorges and rocky slopes of the semi-arid to arid areas of the inland. Like many other members of the family, the flower buds are enclosed in an epicalyx (in this case three yellow-green triangular leafy segments) from which the mauve hibiscus-like flowers emerge, all set against the blue-green of the foliage leaves. The seeds of *G. sturtianum* have only a vestige of the lint seen in the fluffy white bolls of commercial cotton, *Gossypium hirsutum*.
- \*2 *Emmenosperma alphitonioides*** Yellow ash, bonewood NE Queensland to SE NSW  
A rainforest tree to 40m high with a canopy spread to 10m, it has a mostly coastal distribution in NSW and is suitable for parks and gardens with its glossy, green leaves and silver-grey bark. Panicles of tiny white flowers in spring produce clusters of orange capsules maturing in summer. The open fruits have two shiny red seeds clinging to the axis, hence the name from the Greek 'emmeno' I cleave to, and 'sperma' seed. There is a much taller specimen near the bridge between the Mediterranean Garden and Australian Forest.
- \*3 *Pisonia umbellifera*** Parapara, bird-catcher tree Tropical Indo-Pacific, introduced to Qld, NSW  
Along the path on either side of the bottle tree are tall, erect shrubs from the family Nyctaginaceae (4 o'clock family) with large, glossy green leaves and umbel-like clusters of long green fruits which mature to a dark purple-black. The mature fruits are very sticky, perhaps an adaptation for dispersal, and often stick to fur or feathers of passing wildlife. Smaller species, however, can be trapped and die at the site.
- \*4 *Podocarpus elatus*** Illawarra plum Coastal Qld and NSW  
A few paces down the path leading south from a large bunya 'pine' is another tall conifer, native to riverine and littoral rainforests on the east coast. Its seeds are not held in large woody cones like the bunya, but as single, hard seeds attached to the drooping branchlets by a stalk with a fleshy aril, plum-coloured at maturity. Podocarp means 'foot fruit'. The sweetish, pine-flavoured 'plum', rather small here, but often larger than the terminal seed in its native habitat, was prized by Aboriginal peoples on the east coast.
- 5 *Monstera deliciosa*** Fruit salad plant, swiss cheese plant Tropical forests from Mexico to Peru  
Some of the fruit salad plants dominating the understorey here are in flower. Look for a creamy-white bract (spathe) enclosing an inflorescence of many tiny flowers covering the central, yellowish spadix (spike). As the fruitlets ripen over the course of a year the hexagonal scales fall off releasing a strong, sweet scent of pineapples and bananas. The plant can also climb, anchoring itself to a nearby trunk by short aerial roots.
- \*6 *Xanthorrhoea quadrangulata*** Mount 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 ridgetops and rocky outcrops in the Mt Lofty and Flinders Ranges. Tall erect spikes of tiny white flowers 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.
- 7 *Gossypium barbadense*** Egyptian, sea island or pima cotton Ecuador, Peru  
Sea island cotton is one of several species of commercial cotton. Its showy, hibiscus-like yellow flowers, are initially enclosed in a leafy, clawed epicalyx which also surrounds the fruit. Originally from SW Ecuador and NW Peru, evidence of its domestication dates to 4400 BCE. Now cultivated around the world in tropical climes, it is prized for the particularly long silky fibres attached to the seeds which are contained in a capsule known as a boll. *G. barbadense* accounts for 5% of world cotton production.
- 8 Chemotherapeutic agents from plants**  
In the centre of a circular bed, surrounded by the bright purple-pink flowers of *Catharanthus roseus* (Madagascar periwinkle) is a cultivar of *Cephalotaxus harringtonia*, (plum yew) a coniferous species from Japan, two very different species linked by their use in the treatment of various cancers. In particular, alkaloids such as vincristine and vinblastine from the periwinkle are used to treat some leukaemias, and the yew is a source of omacetaxine, used to treat leukaemia resistant to other medication. Appropriately, the tall building to the southwest houses a branch of the Hanson Institute, a leading centre for cancer research.
- 9 *Ulmus parvifolia*** Chinese elm China, Japan, Korea  
The graceful canopy of this semi-deciduous tree provides a pleasant spot to sit and contemplate in this quiet section ('Mind's Ease') of the Garden of Health. The handsome flaking bark of mottled greys, tans and reds gives rise to its other common name, lacebark elm. To the east is a beautiful stone water feature, with an almost imperceptible flow, crafted by Christian Frenzel, an artist whose final touches to the installation were done by hand to ensure even sheeting of water off the faces all round. Weather permitting, the silk-floss trees (*Ceiba speciosa*) in the northern half of the area should be in flower throughout March.