



MISSION: BEAUTIFICATION ... CONSERVATION ... EDUCATION

Planting and Growing with Challenges

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Does Your Garden Have Good Scents?



Above: My Daughter stopping to smell the roses at the Biltmore Estate Gardens

During these steamy months, I love evening walks when the day's work is done and the heat has waned a bit. On one of these recent strolls, the wonderful fragrance of a magnolia blossom, instantly whisked me back to my childhood. Isn't it amazing how certain smells can spark a memory in a flash? I can't smell marigolds without conjuring up the memory of pedaling my big wheel tricycle as fast as I could around and around the brick patio in our backyard. Loving the contrast of gold marigolds and blue ageratums, Mama lined the patio edges each year with fresh plantings of this dynamic duo. These poor flowers were in great peril as my big wheel got up a little too much speed.

I'll admit that marigolds may not be celebrated for their scent, but there are so many plants we can incorporate in our gardens that are. When we think about garden design, it's easy to get

tied up in the aesthetics and forget the rich layer that fragrance can bring to our landscapes. In this issue of Planting and Nurturing I would like to share some of my favorite plants for delighting our southern noses and explore the ways fragrance can enhance our outdoor experience.

The magnificent *Magnolia grandiflora* never disappoints when it opens its grand “flora” and the resulting sweet perfume wafts about. The inspiration for countless potpourri, perfumes and sachets in our drawers, the fragrance of this southern icon signals summer like nothing else.

The ‘Little Gem’ Magnolia often sports more blooms than our native grandiflora and is a great choice for smaller spaces. It has full-size blossoms and smaller leaves and although it is considered “dwarf” in comparison to the species, it still can easily reach twenty feet high and ten feet wide. The Little Gem takes well to pruning, filling out nicely if you snip the ends of its branches. I have espaliered the Little Gem on a large brick wall on one of my projects and the heat retention of the brick encouraged more blooms, putting on a magnificent show! So, prune away and create a hedge, espalier, or bonsai and enjoy the wonderful blooms and resulting summer scent.



Above : *Magnolia* blossom on a Little Gem *Magnolia* (*Magnolia grandiflora* ‘Little Gem’)

Osmanthus will forever wear the crown in Suzanne's Favorite Fragrant Plant Pageant. Many plants vie for this coveted spot, but the tea olive's (*Osmanthus fragrans*) wonderful light, sweet fragrance has an ethereal quality to it that is hard to describe. Some say it's a fruity, apricot smell. The scent can be strong or subtle and oddly I've found that some people can pick up on the fragrance better than others. I've stood next to two individuals (both with the ability to smell) with one exclaiming "What is that wonderful smell?" and the other asking "What smell?"

Although hardy, the evergreen shrub which bears the tiny fragrant flowers is not a visual show-stopper without care. It can make a handsome upright shrub or small tree but tends to get leggy if neglected. I try to place one in every project that crosses my desk; however, I usually place it in an inconspicuous location. The absolute best spot for it in our area is on the southwest corner of a building near a porch. This maximizes the opportunity for our prevalent

winds to waft its wonderful scent across the porch and into the building. The tea olive blooms in the spring and spuratically in the summer and occasionally again in the fall.

The photo on the left is the orange blooming *Osmanthus fragrans aurantiacus*, a little less common in the deep south and more cold hardy than our white blooming *Osmanthus fragrans*.



Left : *Osmanthus fragrans aurantiacus*

We would be amiss to leave out the gardenia (*Gardenia jasminoides*) and its place in the fragrant line-up. This age-old staple in the southern landscape has stood the test of time in spite of its challenges with whitefly infestations and the resulting honeydew and sooty mold as well as its fussiness with soil types. The showy white flowers present themselves each summer for a couple of months and their wonderful fragrance magically helps us forget their other troubles. The tradition of planting a gardenia at the back door of a southern homestead not only provided the



Above : *Gardenia jasminoides 'Radicans'*

wonderful fragrance right at the door, but positioned the plant to be doused with the dirty dishwater as it was pitched out the back door. The trace of dishsoap in the water helped to control the whitefly population and keep the gardenia healthy. Today we have more choices than just the species and can enjoy dwarf, spreading varieties such as *Gardenia jasminoides* 'Radicans.' When using gardenias in a planting plan, I usually note their love for acidic, well drained soil. Amending the soil with lots of sand usually makes the gardenias happy as well as remembering that they need ample water when it's dry; however, they dispise sitting with wet feet.

Citrus plants not only provide us with a treasure trove of fruit in the fall and winter, but also a marvelous fragrance when they are blooming in the spring and again in the early fall. The bees love them too. The photo below is of a meyers lemon tree in my neighbor's yard and the tree was enveloped with the humming of happy bees at the time I took the photo!

The satsuma in my back yard not only provides us with enough marmelade to delight Paddington the Bear but also the orange blossom scent is wonderful in the spring!



Left : *Citrus x meyeri*

On our journey of garden scents, we *must* briefly stop and smell the roses, if only to note that it is necessary to do just that... stop and get our noses close enough to the blossom! Although duly rewarded after taking the time to stoop and breathe in the sweet perfume of a rose, we rarely experience the fragrance simply by stepping outdoors. In this article, I would like to concentrate on the plants that allow us to experience the fragrance, simply by being in and moving about the garden.



Thus far, we've explored a few plants that distribute their scent through a flower. Now, I would like to head down another path and talk about the herbaceous plants that contain the fragrance in their leaves. These plants are perfect to put near paths where their leaves can be brushed by our legs or our feet can step on the fallen leaves as we pass. The leaves of these plants release their fragrant oils when bruised allowing us to experience another realm of fragrance in the garden.

Rosemary is a hard-working shrub in my garden. Wonderfully evergreen, it gives my raised beds a winter presence when so many other veggies and herbs are "out-for-the-season." It finds its way onto our dinner table as an herb and garnish and its woodier stems have even been used as skewers on the grill. Nonetheless, my favorite use of this old friend in my garden is to simply let my jeans brush up against it as I pass by. Or, to run my hands through the oily leaves to take up the fresh, crisp scent onto my hands. I shared with a friend once as we stood over the shrub, rolling the leaves in our hands, that the fragrance was supposed to be a stress reliever. She promptly asked with a grin if she could just roll around in it! I dare say my dog does this and gets up in an improved state.



Above : *Rosemarinus officinalis*

A few tips for rosemary: Plant it, like the gardenia, in sandy soil. It does not like wet feet but doesn't fuss a whole lot about the heat or short dry spells. Never cut more than a third of the shrub at a time or it will die. The most important thing to remember about rosemary is to not have your feelings hurt if after a good show of seven or eight years, it just up and dies. It may just be my own experience, but that is what I've witnessed in my own yard and others. Treat it as something you will enjoy while its there and replace with a new one when it gives up the ghost!



Above : *Illicium floridanum*

Florida Anise (*Illicium floridanum*) is a fabulous native evergreen shrub that I think could be used a lot more as a screen or hedge planting in our southern gardens. I was tickled when I found several on the property we are renovating. They were tall and leggy after about 20 years of neglect so we cut them back to stumps at about 18" from the ground. They bushed back out beautifully as you can see in the photo to the left.

The leaf of the Florida Anise has a spicy sweet scent when crushed and is a delight to mow around when the mower picks up a leaf and sends the scent into the air!

The flowers are lovely but not too showy in our area. Unlike the leaves, they do not have a nice fragrance. Please remember that although the plant produces a star-shaped seed pod, it is toxic, unlike the star anise used as a common spice.



Above : *Artemisia absinthium*
Photo Credit: Deloris Hodges

The earthy, clean scent of (*Artemisia absinthium*) is what won this herb's reserved spot in my garden each year. Its wonderful fragrance reminds me of the large plant I had in my rooftop garden in Baltimore many moons ago. One swipe of its leaves with my hand takes me back to a care-free time when I was single and had very little dirty laundry. This herbaceous perennial sports soft, silvery leaves which contrast well with the dark green leaves of other plants. Wintering over a few years, it has a home near the other herbs in my garden. I simply enjoy the fragrance and appearance, not being brave enough to figure out how it's used for culinary purposes. I've always called it Artemisia, however it has many names including Absinthe, Wormwood and Madderwort.

Lastly, I would like to highlight a plant called Chocolate Mint (*Mentha x piperita f. citrate 'Chocolate'*) simply because of the novelty of a plant in the garden that smells like one of my favorite confections! If you squeeze one of the petite leaves of this plant, you are whisked away into a land made of Peppermint Patties. Yes, you smell chocolate and peppermint at the same time! How fun is that? So next spring when the Bonnie plant display shows up at your local garden center, pick up one of these little guys, and go ahead and grab a Peppermint Pattie as well, because as soon as you smell the plant, you're going to want one!



Above : *Mentha x piperita f. citrate 'Chocolate'*