TAYLOR'S WEEKEND GARDENING GUIDES

Fragrant Gardens

How to select and make the most of scented flowers and leaves

PETER LOEWER

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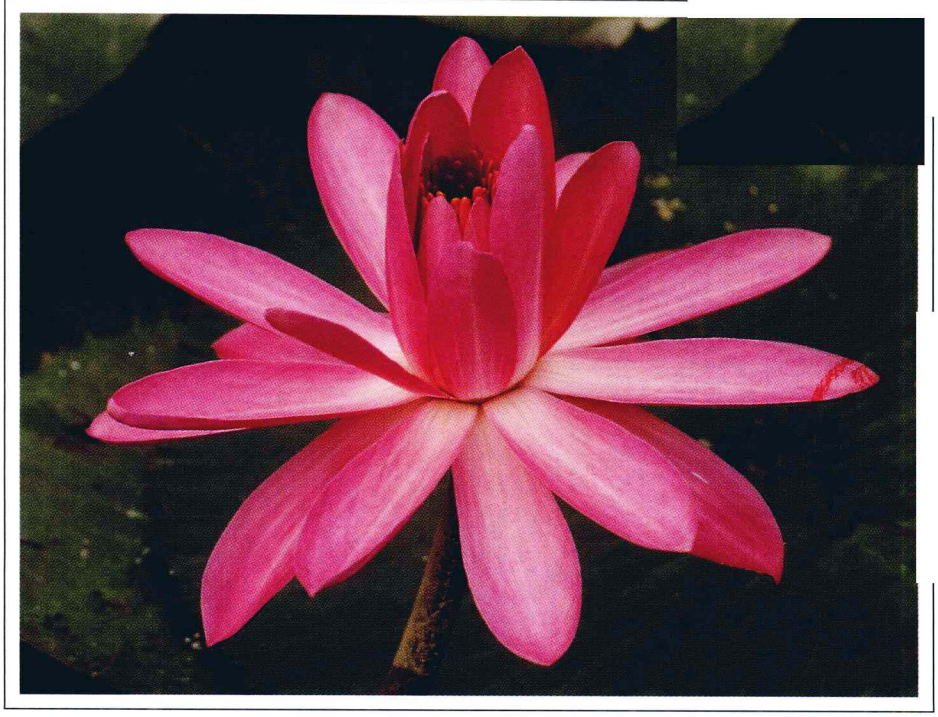

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In the late 1500s, Christopher Marlowe wrote the following lines for his poem "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love":

"And I will make thee beds of roses
And a thousand fragrant posies."

In 1860, some 270 years later, Ralph Waldo Emerson opined in *The Conduct of Life,* "I wish that life should not be cheap, but sacred. I wish the days to be as centuries, loaded, fragrant."

The first is a declaration of love, the second a philosophy of life. Both reflect on one of mankind's five primary senses — the sense of smell.

Many idiomatic sayings are also associated with this sense, including a few that are not complimentary, for example, "It smells to high heaven"; "I am beginning to smell a rat"; and "They wrinkled their noses at the smell." For every ill smell that's recalled, however, there are dozens of proverbs, axioms, and, yes, even clichés, linked to pleasant memories that usually involve flowers.

Trey Fromme, a young landscape architect lecturing at Longwood Gardens, once talked about the fragrant garden and said that we don't often use "odor or fragrance as a focal point in the garden." It's time to do so in the garden world.

I hope that this small book helps to point the way.

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*The perennial daturas (*Brugmansia × insignis *'Pink') produces beautiful pendent flowers when summer heats up.*

Chapter 1
About Fragrances

In May of 1978 I had the opportunity to interview Nigel Nicholson at Sissinghurst Castle. After a tour of his mother's garden we went to the living room for tea, where on a table piled with books (and an overflowing ashtray) sat a large glass bowl filled with white tree peonies *(Paeonia suffruticosa).* To this day when I smell the clean, light fragrance of our own newly opened tree peonies, I instantly recall that early afternoon, the sweet pungence of the blackberry tea, and the murmurings of the nearby visitors wandering the gardens of the castle.

Fragrances reach across the decades like physical links to the past, reminding us of times long forgotten. A floral scent will trigger the memory: the faint odor of orange that recalls the mock orangebush that grew by my grandmother's front porch; the sweet but cloying scent of tuberoses that my Aunt Ida would force into bloom for Thanksgiving dinner; and the light and citric smell of the evening primroses that bloom every year in my own garden, as they open their sulfur yellow flowers to the darkening skies of evening.

"A garden full of sweet odours is a garden full of charm," wrote Louise Beebe Wilder in *The Fragrant Garden.*

> A most precious kind of charm not to be implanted by mere skill in horticulture or power of purse, and which is beyond explain-

The windmill jasmine (Jasminum nitidum) *originally came from the Admiralty Islands, and its fragrance is starry sweet.*

> ing. It is born of sensitive and very personal preferences yet its appeal is almost universal. Fragrance speaks to many to whom color and form say little, and it can bring as irresistibly as music emotions of all sorts to the mind. Besides the plants visible to the eye there will be in such a garden other comely growths, plain to that other sense, such as faith, romance, the lore of old unhurried times. These are infinitely well worth cultivating among the rest. These are an added joy in happy times and gently remedial when life seems warped and tired.

In the mid-1930s Miss Wilder certainly knew her way around the garden. Imagine what she would say in today's world of high-speed drama.

Many flowers need something other than simply blatant color or waving petals to generate an outside interest in their eventual pollination, and that superfluity is oftentimes fragrance. The fragrance is typically sweet, although a flower will occasionally produce a sweet-sour smell reminiscent of stale beer, or in the case of blossoms pollinated by many species of bats, of overripe fruit, or at worst, a distinctly musty odor much like that of a wild animal's den.

Any dog or cat owner knows the importance of smell to an animal's everyday activities. Dogs and cats find their way across vast distances using a combination of sight and sense signals, surprising everybody except those who have lived closely to these creatures.

Many psychologists believe that mankind's ability to recognize and remember an odor once matched that of animals, for mankind's sense of smell was far more pronounced thousands of years ago than it is today. We have lost the ability to recognize and mentally catalog literally thousands of odors. However, our weakened olfactory senses can quickly detect minute differences in a formula for perfume or the subtle changes in an aging bottle of wine. And we cannot overlook the continued popularity of the human scent — the body's production of pheromones, natural scents that are linked to sexual attraction. A burgeoning industry bottles these chemicals. Remember the popularity of musk?

In 1997 the AgBiotech Center of Rutgers University reported that tobacco plants give off clouds of oil of wintergreen, a volatile liquid that functions as an airborne signal warning neighboring plants of an infection of tobacco mosaic

virus. Healthy plants that received the signals immediately built up supplies of salicylic acid, a chemical essential to plant immune activities.

Scientists have long noted that odors are particularly prominent in primitive plants and particularly strong in blossoms that are pollinated by beetles. Tropical nights, they write, are filled, almost beyond belief, with the fragrance of beetle-pollinated blossoms, including the powerful scent of the great Victoria water lily *(Victoria amazonica),* the sweet smell of the magnolia, and the rich odor of the nutmeg tree *(Myristica fragrans).* The rhythm of odor production indicates that even those pollinators with keen eyesight depend on the flower's fragrance as an olfactory road map, especially if the flower is small or drab in appearance. In essence, odors can work as the catalyst that in turn triggers the release of instinctive reactions in animals, particularly in insects.

Floral Fragrance of Yesterday

Dr. Robert Brown, a Scottish botanist of the 19th century, devised three classifications for floral odor: superodorants, subodorants, and nidorants. Superodorants include the perfumes that are agreeable to man, bird, and insect, the sweetest being the odors of the pinks, the orange, roses, the vanilla orchid, daffodils and narcissus, many of the lilies, violets, tuberoses, wallflowers, and the stocks.

Subodorants are flower smells that are less cheery but nevertheless agreeable. For this category, Brown picked flowers like the jessamine, acacias, and the flowers of the almond.

Brown's classification of nidorant includes the fragrance of the rues, garlics, a number of wildflowers called foxy (a salute to the strong odor associated with that animal's personal aura and often to its den), stapelias or carrion flowers (*Stapelia* spp.) and, in particular, the voodoo lily (*Amorphophallus* spp.), which smells so strongly of carrion that its presence soon makes any enclosed space an unbearable place to be. These plants bore flowers whose odors, when first smelled in English greenhouses, supposedly caused strong men to weep and stout British women to faint dead away.

Happily, the flowers described in this book are either superodorant or subodorant, or a combination of both. The nidorant have been left by the wayside.

FLORAL FRAGRANCES FOR TODAY

Fashions change, and the popularity of fragrances is no exception; one generation's most popular scent is an anathema to the next. But a few classifications seem to be constant.

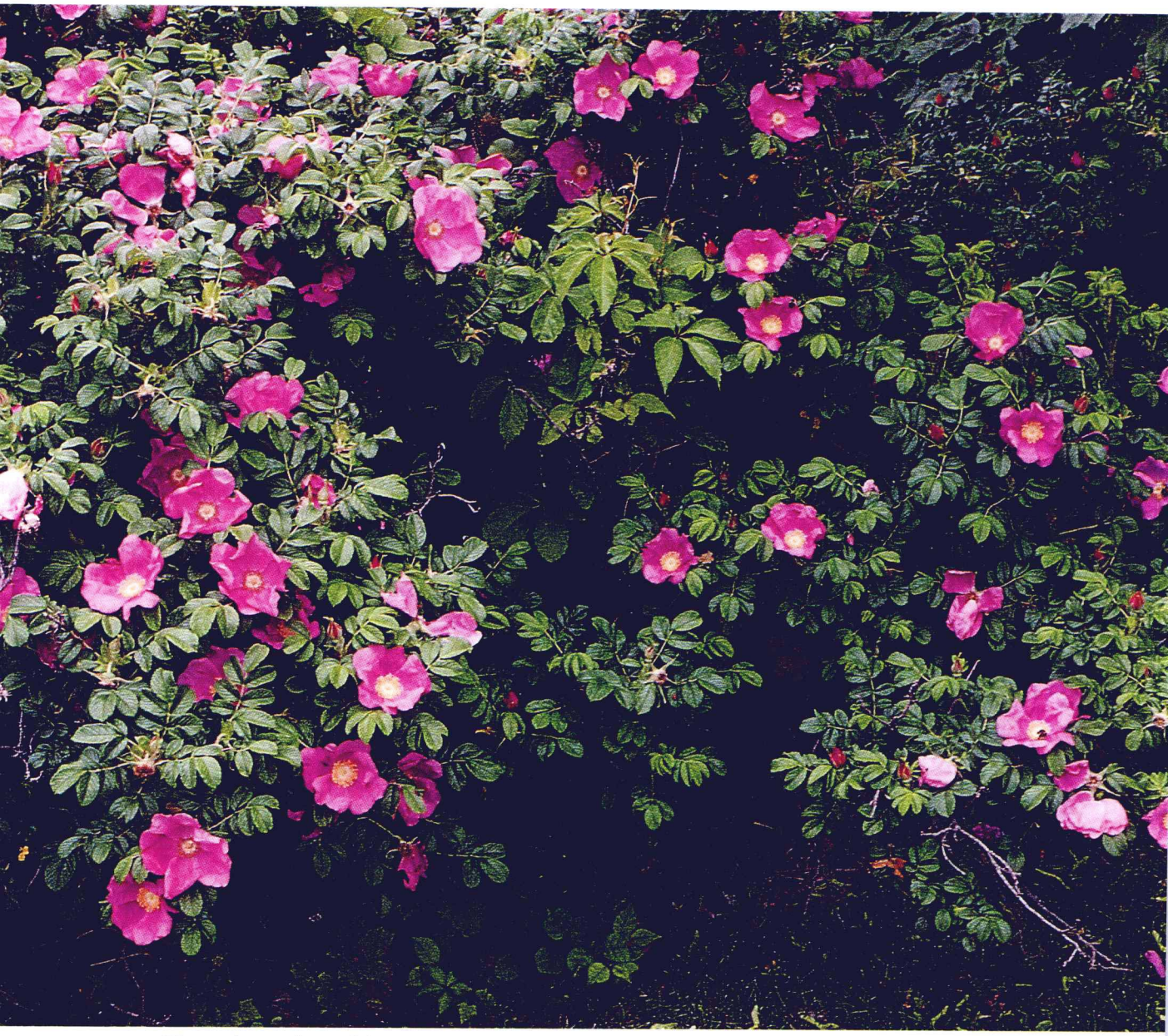
1. Heavy is a fragrance classification that describes those sweet-smelling flowers (and perfumes) that can be overpowering at close range. In the flower category, mock orange (*Philadelphus* spp.), tuberoses, osmanthus, some lilies, and many honeysuckles come to mind. In his 1597 herbal, the English botanist John Gerard called the mock orange "too sweet, troubling and molesting the head in a strange manner." For those with a chemical frame of mind, these scents contain benzyl acetate, indole, and methyl anthranilate. Indole, found in the excrement of animals (including humans), points to the fact that life has always been a strange mix.

When it comes to perfumes, many of the cheaper brands are best described as heavy, and discretion is often the better part of valor regarding the high-priced varieties.

2. Aromatic represents those flowers possessing a spicy fragrance like the garden pink. The chemicals, among others, that conspire to create these odors include cinnamic alcohol, eugenol, and vanilla. (I can remember the marvels of taking the cap from a bottle of real vanilla and inhaling that marvelous sweet fragrance.) Many aromatic flowers, particularly nocturnal flowers, contain some of the chemicals found in the flower group classified as heavy — night-scented stock, nicotiana, many tropical orchids, heliotropes, and *Gladiolus tristis,* for instance. Surprisingly, while many of the orchids do have powerful scents, none of the plants in the aromatic group contain indole, so even if the flowers that produce these fragrances appear to be strange or even bizarre, their odor is never overpowering.

3. Lemon contains citral, a chemical found in oil of lemon, oil of orange, and bay leaves. Although it isn't common in the typical garden flower, lemon scent is very noticeable in magnolias, water lilies, many fragrant daylilies, and four-o'clocks.

4. Foxy is the term applied to the last category of flowers. This polite term refers to plants or blossoms that have a certain ferine odor, slightly musky but certainly not equal to the odor of a caveful of stegosauruses and not potent



The pink members of the rugosas (Rosa rugosa) *grow with single or double flowers and range in blossom color from deep pinks to bright pinks to those with petals of a soft, clear pink. Most are delightfully fragrant.*

enough to lead to the defenestration of the offending plant. When one tries to imagine the privileged haunts of the royal classes (forgetting about sties, privies, and local taverns) of most of the centuries leading up to today's age of soap and deodorant, you have some idea of just how harmless most of the plants that suffer with names like stinking, smelly, or foxy really are. Other than the leaves of a boxwood after a rain and a few tropical trees that are pollinated by bats, I can't think of any garden flower that fits this description.

Certain fragrances often remind us of that marvelous smell of clean clothes hanging on a washline to dry in the sun (not that fake ersatz odor conjured up by chemists and sold to today's housewives — and househusbands — as a necessary substitute for the disappearing backyard). And there are flowers that have the same type of refreshing smell: consider the daffodil or the narcissus or the shy violet in the early spring.

Then there are the so-called fragrances of horror, a term usually applied to the blossoms of the devil's-tongue *(Amorphophallus rivieri)* or the many leathery flowers of the Stapeliad clan. The pollinator is not a bee, wasp, or butterfly but one of the larger members of the ubiquitous fly family, and the smell is one of rotting meat or fermenting vegetables. The odor released by the devil's-tongue was once described as so disturbing and awful that brave women blocks away from Kew Gardens in London (where it first burst forth in the mid-1800s) fainted dead away.

Remember these lines by Joseph Joubert (1754–1824): "Scents are the souls of flowers: they can be perceived even in the land of shadows," and those by Arthur Symons (1865–1945): "Without charm there can be no fine literature, as there can be no perfect flower without fragrance."

Gladiolus tristis *grows wild in South Africa, where it is found at the borders of swamps and wetlands. The flowers are sweetly fragrant, especially in the evening.*

Chapter 2
Garden Care and Maintenance

The plants described in this book range from those that are happy in water to those that prefer the driest of soils to those few that can survive in pure clay. To insure the best growth and the happiest flowers, make sure you know what kind of soil your garden will provide.

Types of Soil

As you plan a fragrance garden, check your soil for its character: is it solid clay, rich loam, or a combination of both? Is it well drained or does the water stand in puddles even after a light rain?

Clay soils are sticky. If you roll a lump of wet backyard soil between your fingers and it forms a compact cylinder that refuses to break up, it's clay. Clay isn't all bad, as it contains valuable minerals that plants need for good growth. When dry, however, clay can be rock hard, and instead of percolating into that soil, rain or hose water simply rolls to the lowest level.

The opposite effect occurs with sandy soils: water is absorbed so quickly that the soil is often dry within hours of a heavy rain.

Oleanders (Nerium oleander) *are shrubs that originated in the gardens of India. They perfume the summer air with the fragrance of almonds. Remember, all parts of this plant are poisonous.*

The best garden material is a good mix of soil and organic matter, much like that found in the woods, where leaves fall and rot over thousands of years. Plus, of course, good drainage. Of all the factors essential to good gardening, the most important is drainage.

There are many ways to improve your impoverished soil. You can add compost from your own compost pile; seasoned manure (fresh manure is usually too strong to plant in directly, so mix it in the soil thoroughly in late fall, winter, or very early spring, and wait a few months before direct planting); leaf-litter; or bags of composted manure, which can be found at garden centers.

RAISED BEDS

If your soil is really bad and not worth the effort to improve, how about making a raised bed? Instead of digging down, mark out your area and build it up about 2 to 3 feet above the ground level using railroad ties from the lumber yard. If you are not sure whether the ties have been treated with creosote (newer ties generally are free of the chemical), be sure to ask as it's dangerous to people and pets. You can even build a wall of concrete blocks, fieldstone, or even bricks. Then fill the new area with your own or purchased top soil.

If you live on the side of a hill, you can do this to build terraces and prevent the rain from washing down the slopes.

Our first country garden — in the Catskill Mountains of upstate New York — was located on a hill composed of granite with an overlay of red shale and a sprinkling of larger rocks. By building retaining walls of concrete blocks and topping them with a layer of fieldstones from nearby old stone walls (for good looks), we created good soil and perfect drainage, and we didn't have to stoop over for cultivation jobs or to pick flowers.

A NURSERY BED

If your garden is expanding and you wish to try new plants, especially those grown from seed, plan for a small nursery bed in your garden. It need not be large, but it should be in a protected spot, have good soil, access to water, and be out of the way so that you aren't under pressure to consider aesthetics. Here you can raise seedling plants to maturity before planting them in the garden proper.