

The Fragrant Garden

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A delight for the senses

Gardens are sensuous. They appeal to all the senses—sight, touch, smell, sound and taste. When the garden is created to look, smell, taste, sound and feel good, it gives you and your visitors a favorable experience.

Vision may be the most dominant sense, but sweet fragrance in the air can evoke stronger feelings, creating nostalgic associations with fond memories from times and places in the past. A garden with seductive fragrance would be a place of love and romance. Therefore, a fragrant garden (or a broader definition of a scented garden) would offer a high value for sensuous qualities.

Plant fragrance comes not only from flowers but also leaves. The scents from foliage (such as scented geranium) would be around for many more months than the scents from flowers (such as roses). Many herbs (like thyme and sage) can be versatile as well as useful in a fragrant garden, with both scented flowers and leaves.

When selecting plants for any garden, it may be desirable to choose a fragrant variety that fits the design over those without scents. Smell the leaves, too. Be choosy, because newer, hybridized varieties from the breeders may actually be less fragrant despite larger flowers and bolder colors.

It is better to plan the fragrant garden with the overall composition in mind: Begin with the taller layer of trees and shrubs and end with perennials and annuals. A well-appointed fragrant garden should also have changing arrays of successive fragrance throughout the seasons.

Some choice trees or shrubs are boxleaf *azara*, *daphne*, *osmanthus*, lilac (French hybrid), California lilac, viburnum (e.g., Korean spice), deciduous azalea (white or yellow), elderberry (Black Lace or Black Tower), butterfly bush (use only sterile ones), sweetbox, witch hazel, Mexican orange-blossom, Chinese paper bush, rose and rosemary.

Some climbing vines, to help forming the wall for the fragrant room, are clematis, jasmine, honeysuckle, wisteria and climbing rose.

Some perennials to consider are shrubby wallflower, *phlox*, bee balm, catmint, hyssop, *dianthus*, daylily, oriental lily, and Russian sage.

To bring the most benefits from your perfumed plants, the location should be a well-visited and sheltered area, even a courtyard. If it is adjacent to the house, locate the plants near the windows and doors that are often open. By positioning the plants close to the wall, the perfume can be better confined and captured.



Left: Mexican orange blossom (*Choisya ternata* 'Aztec Pearl'). **Right:** Butterfly bush (*Buddleia* 'Flutterby Petite Indigo'). Photos by Everett Chu / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners.

A fragrant garden can be ideal for the entryway. Nothing captures immediate attention and creates inviting atmosphere more assuredly than the sweet scent in the air as you approach the front door. A row or a scattering of scented shrubs along the front fence or near the gate is a delightful way to welcome visitors and is much appreciated by neighbors walking by your home.

The fragrant garden could also be along a winding path of a “stroll” garden, leading to a final destination such as a seating area. Better yet, position the seating area, such as a garden bench, right in the middle of the fragrant garden, surrounded with your favorite scented plants.

Locate the fragrant garden according to the prevailing wind direction, usually from the west. For example, west of your front porch or your backyard patio would be a great location.

For those plants that release a pungent aroma when their leaves are brushed or crushed, locate the plants where they can be easily touched such as along the walkways, steps, and gates. Or, as a fun project, create a scented seat in the seating area by covering the seat surface and the area within arm’s reach with aromatic plants such as thymes, mint, rosemary and lavender.

Similarly, the narrow cracks between the pavers in the patio can be cramped with creeping thymes and mints, which could release their aroma at your every step. If your space is limited, a fragrant container near entryway or on the patio can open many possibilities, such as citrus-scented fruit sage and bee balm.



Left: Elderberry (*Sambucus nigra* 'Black Lace'). **Right:** Shrubby wallflower (*Erysimum* 'Apricot Twist'),
Photos by Everett Chu / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners.

Use smaller fragrant plants in containers as seasonal highlights, so you can get close-up and take in their fragrance. Bulbs such as *hyacinths*, *narcissus* and *freesias* would be suitable. And annual plants can be great companions, such as *heliotrope*, *alyssum*, and chocolate cosmos.

The fragrance of plants can be enjoyed inside the home, too, by picking a few sprigs of fragrant foliage and flowers and bringing inside for a fragrant flower arrangement. The fragrant plants can also be turned into homemade potpourri by drying their petals and leaves.

The fragrant garden will be at its best on a warm summer's evening when the air is still and heavy. For outdoor dining area or under a bedroom window, take advantage of a group of plants that are more strongly scented in the evening than during the daytime, including honeysuckle, jasmine and lily. They intensify their scents at night in order to attract nocturnal insects like moths, as pollinators. A fragrant garden at night adds an extra dimension to your garden.

The experience of fragrance is highly personal. Different people may experience the same smells differently and at different times. Therefore, it is necessary to differentiate the desirable from the distasteful. Keep in mind that when it comes to scents, more isn't always better.

Through thoughtful design and careful selection, a fragrant garden can bring about the best of “gardens of many rooms.”

RESOURCES:

- ***Therapeutic Landscapes: An Evidence-Based Approach to Designing Healing Gardens and Restorative Outdoor Spaces.*** Clare Cooper Marcus and Naomi A. Sachs. John Wiley and Sons, 2014.
- ***Fragrance in Bloom: The Scented Garden throughout the Year.*** Ann Lovejoy. Sasquatch Books, 2004.
- ***Garden Design: A Season-by-Season Guide to Tasks and Projects.*** Margaret Crowther & Sue Hook. Parragon Publishing, 2003.
- ***Theme Gardens: How to Plan, Plant, and Grow Sixteen Glorious Gardens.*** Barbara Damrosch. Workman Publishing, 2000.
- ***What Plant Where: The Creative Guide to Choosing the Best Plants for Every Area of Your Garden.*** Roy Lancaster. DK Publishing, Inc., 1995.
- ***Creating a Garden for the Senses.*** Jeff Cox and Jerry Pavia. Abbeville Press Publishers, 1993.



Left: Hardy gardenia (*Gardenia jasminoides* 'Frostproof'). **Center:** Lilac (*Syringa vulgaris* 'Sensation'). **Right:** Mock orange (*Philadelphus* Snow Dwarf). Photos by Everett Chu / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners.