

Fragrant Shrubs for Your Yard

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“Scent is the most potent and bewitching substance in the gardener’s repertory; yet it is the most neglected and the least understood,” says Steve Lacey in his book, *Scented Plants*. Sometimes the faintest scent can transport you back to your childhood. It can make you hungry, affect how you feel, soothe and comfort you, even disturb or distress you. We can be attracted or repelled by various scents. Each of us has different preferences and dislikes—or sensitivity to—about odors.

Scent is for survival. Plants produce perfume to ensure their own survival, to protect against predators and to attract insect pollinators. The oils in the foliage of scented-leaved plants discourage animals and insects from eating them. They often have antiseptic properties that humans have learned to use, but are there to protect the plant when damaged.

Moths and butterflies are attracted to the strongest scented plants. Bees are attracted by color, not scent.

Classifying scents. The subtlety of a flower scent relies on a mixture of chemical compounds and various alcohols within the essential oil of the plant.

The first attempt at classifying flower scents was made by Count von Marilaun in 1893 who divided them into six groups by their predominate chemical substance. Today there are 10 recognized groups of flower scents, plus scent classifications for leaves, bark, and roots. Eight of the ten are generally pleasant. One group of fetid odors attract flies as pollinators, such as skunk cabbage, voodoo lily or rotting meat.

Selecting fragrant shrubs for your yard involves many decisions.

1. Do you have a spot for the plant where you can enjoy the fragrance? Perhaps near a walkway or door? Or a place where you might brush up against the foliage as you pass by?
2. What kind of scent do you want? Honey, vanilla, aromatic, citrus, rose, fruit, heavy (lily, lilac) are some of the scent classifications. Do you want to compliment or contrast other scents in your yard? Or will they contradict each other?
3. What time of year do you want fragrance? There are shrubs for almost every season. Visit nurseries to see what is in bloom and if you like the scent. Do the soil, drainage and light conditions in that spot match the needs of the plant you are considering? Fussy plants like daphnes can die suddenly.

4. Right plant, right place. What is the mature size and shape of the plant? Extreme pruning is not the way to keep a plant small.
5. How much care (time and energy) does the plant need? Vines like *wisterias* need more maintenance than *skimmias*.
6. Do you want it against a wall, in a container, in a narrow walk way, under or on a deck, draping over a wall or pergola?
7. What color scheme are you contemplating? There are exceptions, but most fragrant shrubs have white, pale pink or yellow flowers.
8. Does the shrub add anything else (texture, shape, fall color) to your landscape? Is it attractive out of bloom?

Scent is not the only thing to consider when planning your landscape. Gardens need an overall design with structure, harmony and seasonal interest. Scent can be an underlying element that can add another layer of pleasure to your surroundings.

Scent is, indeed, one of the key elements in planning your landscape. It not only aids in the survival of the plant itself but attracts pollinators as well. In addition, it adds to the design of your landscape. Finally, it adds to our personal pleasure with its ability to soothe, comfort, and to take us back to another time.



Variegated leaves of daphne “Carol Mackie” add interesting foliage long after the sweet-smelling blossoms are gone. *Photo by Nancy Crowell / WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardeners.*

Here is a list of fragrant shrubs by season that do well in the Pacific Northwest:

Early winter:

Mahonia x media (Oregon grape hybrid)
Chimonanthus praecox (wintersweet)
Hamamelis mollis (witch Hazel)
Viburnum x bodnantense “Dawn”

Mid-winter:

Sarcococca (sweet box)
Edgeworthia chrysantha (paperbush)
Viburnum farreri (viburnum)

Late winter:

Daphne odora (many varieties)
Choisya ternata (Mexican orange)

Spring:

Osmanthus x burkwoodii
Skimmia japonica (skimmia)
Viburnum carlesii (Korean spice bush)—perhaps the most fragrant one for here
Viburnum x carlcephalum (fragrant snowball)
Viburnum x juddii (semi-snowball)

Late spring-early summer:

Syringa (lilac)
Rosmarinus officinalis (rosemary)
Deutzia (deutzia)
Rhododendron luteum (honeysuckle azalea)
Rhododendron loderi (many varieties/cultivars)
Laburnum (golden chain tree)
Lupinus arboreus (yellow bush lupine or tree lupin)

Summer:

Rosa (roses—a whole world unto itself)
Philadelphus lewisii (mock orange)
Lavendula (lavenders)
Ceanothus (California lilac)
Buddleja/Buddleia (butterfly bush—sterile cultivars only)
Clethra alnifolia (sweet pepperbush/summersweet)
Elaeagnus x ebbingei (silverberry)
Cydonia oblonga (edible quince)

Lastly, fragrant evergreens can be cut and brought into the house during the winter holidays.

RESOURCES:

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