

Scents and Sensibility

Can You Make Scents of This?

Garden writers wax eloquent about the “Queen of the Garden” who raises her “trumpets up to view and fills the night air with smells that are as delicious to people as they are to the moths” she is trying to attract. Our forebears recognized the value of this “star of all Moon Gardens”, siting it where they could best appreciate its evening fragrance. (Victorian ladies strolled through such gardens without fear of darkening their complexions.)

The hybrid descendants of this plant are shorter, bushier, and more colorful, but, sadly, often lack the parent’s perfume. Although nearly all the members of the genus are American in origin, the genus name is derived from the last name of a Frenchman, and is frequently mispronounced. Are you on the scent of the mystery plant?

Jean Nicot, a sixteenth-century French ambassador to Portugal is said to have obtained tobacco seed from a Dutch merchant returning from the West Indies. Nicot sent some seed to the queen of France. Eventually the genus which includes both commercial tobacco and our mystery plant was named after him – Nicotiana. The “Queen of the Night Garden”? *Nicotiana alata*, flowering tobacco. The preferred pronunciation is’ **Nick oh shee ah nah**. *Nicotiana alata* (**ah lah’ tah**) is also known as *Nicotiana affinis*, or winged, wild, jasmine, ornamental or sweet-scented tobacco.

Nicotiana alata is one of just a few of the 67 species of annuals, perennials, shrubs and trees in the genus commonly grown as ornamentals. A member of the *Solanaceae* (nightshade) family, it has slightly sticky stems and leaves. Native to an area that ranges from southern Brazil to northeastern Argentina, *N. alata* is a tender herbaceous perennial usually treated as a tender annual in the United States. In gardens where winter temperatures seldom drop below 23 degrees Fahrenheit, the plant is usually root-hardy. It is advisable to give it a dry winter mulch. *N. alata* requires more than fourteen hours of daylight each day before its white flowers bloom. In the northern hemisphere, one can expect flowers to be in bloom from July to September. Seeds ripen from August to October. The hermaphrodite flowers are pollinated by bees, moths and butterflies.β