



THE FRAGRANT GARDEN

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I don't know which I like best about my garden, the colors or the smells. My front yard is clothed in quiet colors: white, pinks, lavenders. What a calming place to be after a stressful day. My backyard, on the other hand, is full of bright reds, oranges, yellows. What cheer! What energy!

But as much as I love the colors, it's the smells that bewitch me. I can leave my colorful flowers outside to brighten the yard, but I need to bring the fragrant ones in to fill the house. I'll find myself walking in the neighborhood and some fragrance will stop me dead in my tracks. I can't go on until I've found the flower that has given off that wonderful aroma and figured out if I can grow it in my garden too.

Plants developed fragrance as part of their survival strategy. Fragrant flowers help to attract the insects, birds and bats which will transfer pollen from one plant to another. This strategy is much more efficient than that of more primitive wind-pollinated plants. The plant does not need to produce as much pollen and the pollen is delivered directly to the pistils of neighboring flowers. Fertile seeds are more likely to be produced and genetic diversity is increased as the pollinators move from plant to plant.

Of course, just because the pollinators love the smell doesn't mean that people will be so enamored. We've all heard of the carrion plant, whose flower gives off the smell of rotting meat. It is very efficient at attracting flies, and it's interesting in theory, but it's not a flower that most of us want to experience.

Fragrant foliage provides another aspect of plant survival—protection. Volatile oils and chemical compounds produced in the leaves of some plants can be toxic to insects. The smell of the foliage alerts pests to the danger, and insects and small mammals avoid the plant. These plants produce their own natural pesticides and insect repellents. Fragrant plants reap an additional benefit when it comes to survival. People will propagate them, and make sure they survive in our gardens.

What fragrant plants will practice their survival strategies in your garden?

Lavenders do well in our hot summers, requiring occasional water and very little fertilizer. Try the hedge lavenders (*Lavandula x intermedia*) such as "Grosso" and "Province" for the classic lavender foliage and very fragrant flowers. Experiment with Spanish lavenders (*L. stoechas*) for their unique flowers or French lavenders (*L. dentata*) for their toothed foliage.

Rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis*) is another aromatic plant that thrives in our Mediterranean climate. It blooms in the winter, adding a spot of blue when the remainder of the garden is resting.

As long as we're talking about garden herbs, **thyme** is a must in your fragrant garden. Creeping thyme (*Thymus serpyllum*) or woolly thyme (*T. pseudolanuginosus*) may be planted in rock crevices or between paving stones. They will tolerate light foot traffic and release their pungent smell as you walk over them.

Many garden **geraniums** (*Pelargonium*) have deliciously scented leaves. You can add the aromas of almond, lemon, apple, rose, peppermint and others to your garden with these versatile perennials. Place all of the above in full sun to coax the leaves to release their volatile oils or rub a leaf or two as you wander through the garden.

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I guess the **rose** (*Rosa*) would head the list of fragrant flowers. Although the modern hybrid tea roses are unmatched for beauty, nothing can compete with the "old roses" for fragrance.

Gardenia (*Gardenia jasminoides*) is another favorite that does well in our area. Be sure to give them ample water and afternoon shade and they'll reward you with abundant blooms throughout the summer.

For a native California shrub that requires little water, the **bush anemone** (*Carpenteria californica*) can't be beat. It grows slowly to about six feet tall and produces clusters of fragrant white flowers in the spring and summer.

Plant **star jasmine** (*Trachelospermum jasminoides*) and **honeysuckle** (*Lonicera*) for fragrant vines. Alternate these two along a fence for a succession of wonderful odors from spring through summer. The star jasmine can also be pruned as a ground cover if grown without support.

Another fragrant ground cover is **sweet alyssum** (*Lobularia maritime*). Plant en masse and enjoy blooms from spring until frost.

Don't forget the bulbs! **Hyacinths** (*Hyacinthus orientalis*) and **'Paper White' narcissus** (*Narcissus tazetta*) are a must for the spring garden. It may be necessary to replant the hyacinths in our area, but the narcissus will grow and multiply happily. One of my favorite bulbs, actually a rhizome, is the **tuberose** (*Polianthes tuberosa*). These intensely fragrant flower spikes arrive in the summertime and one spike can perfume the whole house.

Finally, try the **moonflower** (*Ipomoea alba*) for fragrance in the night garden. This vine produces 6-inch white flowers that bloom at night, continuing the fragrance of your garden on into the night.

These are a few of the fragrant plants and flowers you can use. Check the resources below and plant fragrant plants to enjoy the year round.

References

The Sunset Western Garden Book.

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