

Fragrant Flowers Add Another Dimension to Gardens

by Larry Williams *

Thursday, May 9, 2002



I've enjoyed the fragrant flowers of a sweet osmanthus shrub in my backyard during late winter through early spring. Many gardeners overlook this aspect of fragrance in their landscape. It has been said that smell is the sense that is most memorable and that none of the other senses is more subtle in its suggestions or more reminiscent of a certain time.

Dr. Bob Black, University of Florida Extension Horticulture Specialist, describes fragrance as "the fourth dimension in the garden" and says that it shouldn't be overlooked. I agree.

The purpose of a flower's fragrance is thought to be that of an attractant to nectar-feeding insects. Not all perfumes are found in the flowers, however. Scents also may be found in roots, bark, gum or oils, leaves stalks and sometimes in the seed.

Generally, fragrant flowers are lightly colored or white. Although brilliantly colored flowers are not usually fragrant, there are exceptions. Flowers that are thick in texture, such as citrus, magnolia and gardenia, are often the most distinctive and intense in scent.

There may be a vast difference in the strength of the fragrance even among members of the same species. In addition, the degree of fragrance may vary with several conditions such as time of day, age of the flower, air temperature and moisture level. The hours when the scent is strongest may even differ for the same plants. The scent depends on the essential oils which are present in varying amounts depending on these conditions. These oils evaporate at different speeds and different temperatures. Roses, for example, smell sweetest in mild, damp mornings when the sun hits them. They reach a peak at noon and by night they may no longer be fragrant.

Some plants that produce flowers which open only at night, reveal no scents during the daylight hours but are odoriferous at night. Still other plants send out fragrance both day and night, the scent varies during these different times of day.

Scent may also vary as the flower begins senescence. Drought and heat can rob the flowers of their sweetness. Gardens smell sweetest when the air is mild and moisture is high. During periods of extreme drought and heat, the fragrant ethers are much less and the decrease in scent is noticeable. Frost may release dormant fragrance, as does a rain shower.

To add fragrance to the garden, many types of plants may be used, including trees, shrubs, vines and perennials. Banana shrub, fortune osmanthus, sweet osmanthus, gardenia, rose, confederate jasmine and sweet viburnum represent a few plants to consider for North Florida landscapes, which produce fragrant flowers.

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There are many other plants that may be used to add fragrance in your garden. But Black recommends purchasing such plants when they are in bloom so that their scent can be personally tested.

For more information about gardening in our area, visit the University of Florida IFAS Leon County Extension website at <http://leon.ifas.ufl.edu>.

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