

A garden isn't complete without the fragrance of flowers, says **James Alexander Sinclair**, and those that release their perfume at night are particularly alluring



**Many years ago,** I remember sitting in a friend's garden at about eight o'clock on a warm July evening: the sun was thinking about setting, birds were stuffing the last of that day's worms into the mouths of their demanding offspring and the occasional bee was working overtime in the foxgloves. Every so often an early rising bat would whizz across the sky in search of whatever it is that bats are after (midges hopefully) ice clinked in glasses and the garden was washed intermittently by the most heavenly scent.

It was not a strong, knock-em-over-at-a-hundred-paces perfume, but something subtle and elegant, like Sophia Loren walking past a restaurant table. My friend was not a gardener and had no idea which flower had produced the scent. I should have got up and ferreted around his borders until I found out but, and I am only slightly ashamed to admit it, I was too comfortable and couldn't be bothered to move. Sometimes it is better to just appreciate the moment rather than go searching after knowledge. This, however, is not one of those moments – this is a moment for stringent horticultural action, rather than lolling in hammocks. But, before we do that let's consider scent in the garden.

**Fragrance at twilight**

The first thing that anybody does when they come into close contact with a flower is lift it to their nose. Tiny children do the same thing, as we are all taught from the cradle to equate flowers with scent.

Often more distinct than sight, the sense of smell is the element of our gardens most strongly associated with memory. Many of us remember the particular smell of a jasmine in our grandmother's garden or a peppery scented, winter-flowering sarcococca

# Scent at dusk

ABOVE Evening primrose, *Oenothera stricta* 'Sulphurea', has scented flowers that open at dusk  
 TOP RIGHT Grow compact *Zaluzianskya ovata* 'Eldenhurst' in pots on the patio to enjoy the perfume  
 RIGHT *Nicotiana sylvestris* has trumpet-like flowers with an intense fragrance

## Top 10 for night scent

**1 Brugmansia**  
These shrubs can put on 2m of growth in a year. Hanging trumpets are as sweetly scented as the wrists of epimeliads and flowers range from white to soft orange. Frost tender.

**2 Cestrum nocturnum**  
Also known as night-blooming jasmine, it has insignificant, greenish-white flowers that only come alive in the evening. Frost tender. Height 90cm

**3 Crambe cordifolia**  
Frothing cloud of white flowers, over rough leaves, which release a scent of slightly bitter honey. Height 2.5m

**4 Hesperis matronalis**  
A vigorously self-seeding perennial with washed violet flowers, although there is also a fine white variety. Height 90cm

**5 Matthiola longipetala**  
Having the common name 'night-scented stocks' is a big giveaway. Easily grown from seed sown in situ in early summer. Height 30cm

**6 Nicotiana sylvestris**  
A tobacco plant that is happy in a bit of dappled shade with big leaves and spires of white flowers. It's an annual but will self-seed. Height 1.5m

**7 Oenothera stricta**  
The fragrant evening primrose is best in sunshine with free-draining soil and is drought tolerant. Height 75cm

**8 Rosmarinus officinalis**  
Rosemary is not strictly speaking a plant that only gives off scent at night, but it is always a pleasure at any time of year to rub your hand through the leaves. Height 1.5m

**9 Silene noctiflora**  
This wild flower has little pinkish white flowers that are pollinated by nocturnal insects. Not the best garden flower, but wonderful to encounter on a country walk. Height 50cm

**10 Zaluzianskya ovata**  
South African and not reliably hardy so probably best grown in a pot. Sow seeds in March and deadhead regularly. Height 25cm



by a doorway, probably more than the shape and colour of the flowers. My trigger is heliotrope – a deep purple blue flower, which my mother grew in pots.

Scented plants fall roughly into four categories – firstly those with fragrant leaves that release their perfume when crushed or brushed past, with the most obvious being well-known herby plants such as lavender, mint, basil, rosemary and thyme. The second category is much the largest, including roses, orangey philadelphus and climbers like *Trachelospermum jasminoides* or honeysuckle, which release their scents during the heat of the day. The third group consists of the resinous plants (mostly conifers like spruce or pine), which give out

sharper, less flowery smells. Last, but definitely not least, group four contains those that wait until the cool evening before opening their flowers and releasing a wave of fragrance.

As the twilight settles and you can feel the air freshening, the idea of something exotic and unseen looming from the darkness (and these plants do mostly loom, as they all have light-coloured and faintly luminescent flowers) is far more exciting and mysterious than a full-bodied rose at midday. Perhaps it is because we are much more relaxed at that time, but there is something almost a bit decadent and naughty about night-scented plants. They are much more boudoir than teatime in the drawing room. ▷

**ABOVE LEFT** Night scented stocks, *Matthiola longipetala*, are easy to grow from seed, with sprays of flowers all summer  
**ABOVE** Attract bees and beneficial insects with *Crambe cordifolia*, which produces a mass of blooms midsummer

## And now the science bit...

**Where does flower scent come from?** A flower's fragrance is a complex cocktail of aromatic oils created in the petals, which evaporate into the warm air. Other scents, sometimes imperceptible to us but detected by the insects, are produced by leaves, fruits, shoots and roots. Night-scented flowers can seem more fragrant, but this is often because the wind drops at nightfall, so the heavy perfume lingers longer.



The swallow tailed moth is nocturnal and emerges in July

**Why do some plants release scent at night?** Night-scented flowers attract a nocturnal pollinating workforce. By moving in the dark, night-flying insects avoid major predators, such as sharp-eyed birds, although they do have to cope with bats.

**When will I see nocturnal flying insects?** Dusk and early evening are the peak flight periods, but in summer the buzz goes on well after midnight.

**Which insects are attracted?** Moths are the best-known night dwellers, typical species including old lady, hawk moths, brimstone, swallowtailed and angleshades. But there are also plenty of beetles and flies.

**How are they attracted?** Flowers are scented to guide the insect pollinators to their nectar reward. Without light to see a flower, smell becomes the dominant sense, and moths are known to follow a wafting scent upwind for hundreds of metres.



**LEFT** Fast-growing *Brugmansia* 'Estella' is vigorous, with large 30cm long flowers  
**BELOW** *Hesperis matronalis*, known as sweet rocket, produces scented flowers which range from lilac through to pink and white



This poetic stuff is all very well, but in order to get the best from these plants you need to think carefully about where to plant them. There is little point in planting, for example, sweet-smelling tobacco plants in an out-of-the-way part of the garden that is seldom visited at night.

Instead, concentrate on planting close to where you are likely to be, around the terrace, patio or beside a well-worn path. A front garden is a particularly good spot for scented plants, especially either side of any doorway. This works with pretty much any scented plant although evergreens like *Sarcococca confusa* (or *hookeriana*) are preferable for year-round interest – they flower in March. Another useful trick to bear in mind is that scented plants should

ideally be planted in areas sheltered from wind, so tuck them in against walls or hedges. This way the perfume stays close rather than being blown off next door for the benefit of less deserving others.

There are a great variety of plants that will give you a pretty sensational evening, but remember that in this country – as I am sure you may have noticed – perfect evenings are not quite as common as they are in, say, the Balearics or the Caribbean. Often they are cold and a bit drizzly, so it is important to make sure that scent is not your only criterion in choosing plants – don't forget flowers and leaves. That said, it is such a powerful sensation that any garden, no matter how pleasing to the eye, will never be complete without scent. □

 **FOR MORE INFORMATION**  
on scented plants visit [gardenersworld.com/plant/collections/4/9/scented-flowers](http://www.gardenersworld.com/plant/collections/4/9/scented-flowers)