Comment

Scent with memories

Editor of The Garden, Chris Young

Ask two gardeners what their favourite scented flower is and you are sure to receive two different answers. One may plump for a summer winner, such as the seemingly endless perfume of sweet peas, or a rose in full bloom, while the other may play a game of horticultural one-upmanship and go for a less-common shrub, perhaps the pink-purple blooms of Clerodendrum bungei or the honey-scent of Buddleja x weyeriana.

Either way, scent often evokes deeply personal responses. The dark green foliage of evergreen shrub Osmanthus × burkwoodii can seem somewhat dull during the year, yet the plant is thrust into the spotlight in spring with the prettiest clusters of white, highly fragrant flowers. As a youngster, I remember walking between one of these shrubs and our garden fence, and stopping to take in the perfume – a smell I can recall in an instant.

It is perhaps this endless – and often unexpected – benefit that gardeners get from scented plants that makes them so valuable. Whether you come across an unidentified perfume in a winter garden, or take in the smell of lavender ‘Hidcote’, there are so many aromas to choose from.

One of the difficulties with this subject is the lexicon for scent. The ways we describe it vary as much as our perceptions, and we sometimes struggle to find the words. One person’s ‘tangy’ can be another’s ‘sharp’; my ‘subtle’ can be your ‘refreshing’. Fortunately, in this issue we have Stephen Lacey to give an overview of some of the best-scented plants for growing throughout the year (pp50–57), including descriptors for each.

The substantial selection of plants chosen for the article’s photography (55 in total, mainly from RHS Garden Wisley and some from Great Dixter), was in part informed by RHS members sending in their ideas (Comment, March 2013, p17). Thank you for all your suggestions and for completing our online survey – clearly the passion for, and interest in, fragrant flowers is shared by most gardeners.

Charles Quest-Ritson writes on La Mortola (pp59–63):

In 1874, Hanbury sent a list of 103 plants flowering on New Year’s Day to Gardener’s Chronicle – there were 516 in flower by 1886.

A tricky decision for the choicest spot

Author: Helen Dillon, gardener and writer living in the Republic of Ireland

It is not the challenge of difficult growing areas that I find so hard to fill; it is my beautifully appointed, first-class sunny positions, such as the warm wall in the glasshouse, that torment me. Of all the thrilling, slightly tender shrubs, which deserves such a choice position? Over the past 42 years I have tried everything – plumbago, winter jasmine, winter-flowering salvias, Bomarea multiflora, Cestrum nocturnum (lady of the night), Rosa ‘Maréchal Niel’, grapevines and passionflowers, to name just a few.

I have, at last, made a decision: my absolute top plant for this sunny wall has to be South American Fuchsia boliviana var. alba (right). This makes a small, graceful tree, seldom out of flower, with beautiful dangly earring flowers of vermilion fading to white.

The only disconcerting thing about this glorious fuchsia is that it sometimes drops its long, cool flowers down the back of my neck, causing a shiver of fright as I determine whether it is a flower or one of the false widow spiders that live in the wall behind.

It does not have the high glamour of the fuchsia, but every time I look on Pachyphragma macrophyllum I think, ‘What a lovely spring plant’ with its fresh green shiny leaves and sparkling little white blooms. All white flowers seem to be referred to as ‘pure white’, but this one really is just that. It is easily divided, not fussy about soil, and happy in dry summer shade.

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Edens beyond the razor wire
Lalage Snow’s article on gardens in war-torn areas (The Garden, December, p56-63) proved strongly emotive.

Congratulations on the article. It was not only fascinating but you showed courage in featuring a garden in Palestine - an area most magazines avoid for fear of offending people.
The bravery and perseverance shown by these people is inspiring, as is their achievement in gardening in such a hot and dry environment.
Paul Cleaver, Devon

Brilliant and inspirational article on Kabul gardens.
Dominic Cole, London

Congratulations on publishing Lalage Snow’s article on defining a garden. It opens a new perspective on gardening where the element of danger is not present in our Western world, impacts on what can be achieved.
Gardens in such zones have an important role in people’s lives in providing food and as an outlet in a stressful environment. I visited the Bagh-e-Babur gardens during a trip to Kabul, Afghanistan in the 1960s. Unfortunately, it was December, but the weather was warm and frosty and the location spectacular. Richard Constanduros, Ross-shire

I read The Garden with great interest and appreciate that it must take time and effort to research and prepare.
In the December issue, however, I was somewhat disturbed by this article. I always assumed that the RHS was a apolitical organisation yet this article had a political undertone, specifically anti-Israel in the section on Palestinian gardens.
I do not believe that everything Israel does is perfect. Yet neither Israel, nor any other country in the world, should be the subject of political commentary in your publication.
I thought the purpose of The Garden was to provide information and updates relating to the many aspects of horticulture but this article seemed to go well beyond that.
Gordon Wolff, Hertfordshire

We greatly appreciated this article. It really showed how important gardens and growing can be, especially when life is really tough.
Sue and Adrian Sullivan, Kent

Baker’s doyen
What a delightful and unex- pected surprise it was to read Roy Lancaster’s informative article on Cyrus Pringle (People behind the plants, Sept 2013, p96-96).
He is indeed a bit of a local hero here in Charlotte, Vermont, where the nursery he founded is still a thriving business. It is now called Horfords Gardens and Nursery and is the centre of such business in Vermont.
The poet Robert Frost was often seen wandering through the extensive gardens.
Roy might find it amusing to see that a bread has been named in Pringle’s honour.
Alexandra Lehmann, Vermont, USA

Rotten pleasures
I did intend to tidy up the garden ready for the winter but, like Lia Leendertz (Gardening, December, p21), I failed to do so. I blamed the weather… it has been so wet. But, also like Lia, I love to look out over my garden and see the dead seed-heads, soggy golden leaves, drying fuchsias and rotting logs.
Thanks Lia for making it acceptable to leave the garden to its own devices for a bit.
Linda Hart, Surrey

In general I cannot agree more with Lia Leendertz. I worked on my garden all my life and must say it looked pretty good. Now, however, I am 80-plus and can no longer keep up the standard myself. But guess what? The garden looks just as interesting, if not better, doing its own thing as long as the lawn and the edges are kept tidy. This is done by my part-time gardener who comes twice a week.
My advice is: don’t let it get you down – enjoy the sunsets in the summer from a garden chair, with a glass of something.
Sebastian Noall, Surrey

My thanks to Lia, for providing the pointed stick needed to prompt thoughts into words.
Every autumn there are endless publications that encourage us to go out in the garden and clean up the fallen, dying foliage in a hurry manner. It is good for the circulation, and prevents little miscreants from overwintering under the summer’s detritus. Presumably they would get a quick sleep and then sharpen their teeth ready to pounce on spring’s sprouts.

Dotted among this tidy approach however are articles promoting the definition of tidy. In these we are told to leave the slimy leaves alone as they provide fodder for the compost heap. I love the look of the window and the feel of green.
Garden designers have picked up on this: gabions filled with drainpipes and bamboo canes have become a favourite. Eco-cred trumped to the next client. So what are we to do? Put up a bug house with a sign above it stating ‘Only nice bugs need apply’?
Sebastian Noall, Surrey

Making a home for moss
In our wet part of the country, south of Edinburgh, moss grows well. However, I despair of trying to encourage permanent moss under our trees.
Then my husband, who loves his lawn without moss, used a moss scraper and generated enormous mounds of moss and grass. I suggested we laid it thickly (5cm/6in or more) over a damp dark area under trees where nothing much grew. Now, we have a lovely moss garden.
You can’t walk on it though as footprints compress the moss and leave permanent hollows, so I would advise laying stepping stones on the ground surface before spreading the moss. And, of course, you need to ensure there are no perennial weeds and that the lawn has not been treated with weed killer before being scraped.
K Pratt, Peeblesshire
Do we need a ‘red list’ of endangered nurseries?

The Garden columnist Nigel Colborn on threats to Britain’s nursery trade

What other nation than ours has so varied a garden flora that it can publish an annual directory – RHS Plant Finder – listing 75,000 plants and naming the nurseries that sell them?

Most of the 500 or so nurseries in Plant Finder are small businesses supplying a modest portion of the market. Some cater for niche markets; others focus on mainstream items – perennials, shrubs, bulbs – but in great variety. Together they sustain and enrich the diversity of plants for which our gardens are so famous.

Garden centres and big mail-order firms have the largest market shares. Anyone can find pansies, say, or popular lilacs at a garden centre. Walk past the patio loungers, barbecues, Jacuzzis, country clothes and restaurant and there they’ll be – in a zone known as the plantaria.

However, you’re unlikely to find centuries-old Chrysanthemum ‘Emperor of China’ in a plantaria. It lacks commercial appeal, having 2m (6½ft) collapsible stems. To discerning gardeners, however, such shortcomings are outweighed by beetroot-red November foliage contrasting with silver-pink flowers. Currently RHS Plant Finder lists 16 suppliers for C. ‘Emperor of China’. Without them, such cultivars could become extinct. Plant Heritage and its National Plant Collections might provide a lifeline, and enthusiasts might share stocks, but without nursery production, the plant would be in jeopardy.

Under pressure

Because they play such a key role, you might think specialist nurseries are doing well – and many of them are. But horticulture is chronically under-rewarded, margins (always wafer thin) are under increasing pressure and energy prices continue to soar. Proprietors who do best are clever at marketing as well as propagation – but life is tough.

An effective way for nurseymen and gardeners to come together is at flower shows. The spring beauty of Avon Bulbs, green glory of Fernatix and superbly staged pitcher plants by Hampshire Carnivorous Plants – these are examples of the amazing diversity that nursery exhibits bring. And when nursery people share their knowledge, visitors have much to gain.

Yet with escalating costs, some nurseries find it increasingly difficult to exhibit. Some have dropped out. Television has not helped either: for years it has slanted coverage in favour of show gardens, drawing attention away from floral exhibits. Fortunately there are new exhibitors and a long season of big shows that are more affordable than Chelsea.

More recently a darker cloud has appeared: proposed EU legislation requiring all ‘plant reproductive material’ to be listed on an official register (see News, November 2013, p8). If that happens, another cost would be imposed on an industry that is not only under pressure, but is crucial to Britain’s floral diversity. It is important, of course, that breeders’ rights and intellectual property is protected. Without such protection the incentive to develop new plants is weakened.

But what possible reason could there be for compelling nurseries to supply only registered plants, to control what may be sold and what may not? Plants are not drugs or dangerous substances. When they change hands, not just at nurseries or plant fairs but at garden fêtes, Women’s Institute events or simply between friends, this is not illegal trafficking and should never be made so.

The nurseries in RHS Plant Finder are the beating heart of all that is great in our gardens. If they cannot retain their hold on that diverse and fascinating sector of Britain’s plant market, the annual directory we treasure so much could become a slim volume. Every garden could begin to look the same, creative planting would lose its quirky individuality and the unexpected richness and eccentric charm that makes the best British gardens so special, would be lost. That must not happen.
Lighting up the winter gloom

The Garden columnist Mary Keen takes stock

I love the winter garden, especially in February. When people say they miss flowers while they wait for spring, they must be talking quantity not quality. I look out of the window at the piercing pink of Cyclamen coum under hellebores in shades of green and dusky plum, while winter jasmine is still pouring showers of yellow stars down its slim green strands. Pulmonaria ‘Blue Ensign’ is a reminder of summer, and now is the time when white comes into its own as snowdrops and Daphne mezereum f. alba light up dark afternoons.

I love the specialness of the flowers that see us through the season when the sun is at its lowest. One bud of Iris unguicularis will set me up for a day if I bring it indoors to open. There is more time to appreciate Crocus tommasinianus while waiting for the buds of native Narcissus pseudonarcissus to swell and open. Rarer sorts, like primrose-pale N. ‘Cedric Morris’ will be out now, as will brassier N. ‘Rijnveld’s Early Sensation’. Then there are subtle flowers that would never rate a glance in June. Ribes laurifolium, with its hanging tassels of apple-green currant flowers, is one of my favourites.

If you sulk indoors all winter, you may never appreciate how wonderfully scented flowers can be at this time of year. By our back door, a bush of Sarcococca hookeriana var. humilis delivers a knockout honey scent from its inconspicuous flowers; elsewhere, Viburnum x bodnantense ‘Dawn’ and ‘Charles Lamont’ are deliciously sweet. Grow Chimonanthus praecox and one twig will make a room smell better than the priciest scented candle. Daphnes, my favourite snowdrop Galanthus ‘S. Arnott’ and Crocus chrysanthus ‘Cream Beauty’ all smell heavenly. And the biggest bonus of the winter garden is that it is less demanding: plants stay tidy for ages.

If you remain unconvinced, get out to the many winter gardens that are open now, such as those at Dunham Massey in Cheshire, Mottisfont in Hampshire and Anglesey Abbey in Cambridgeshire. All have plants to make fair-weather gardeners think again.

On the road to recovery

Garden owner Michael Pell on the recuperative power of gardening

After a wonderful Christmas in 2011, I did a spot of gardening in my Devon plot to help work off the excesses of the preceding few days. While sawing away some overgrown hollies, I was suddenly kicked in the middle of my back by what I thought was a deer. I only wish it had been; instead, I had experienced a stroke.

Lying in hospital for three weeks can allow one to wallow in self-pity. But my biggest worry was how on earth would the garden be ready for its first public opening, in aid of the National Gardens Scheme (NGS), the following May? At my lowest point, my thoughts turned to cancelling the event and resigning myself to moving house and leaving the garden behind, incomplete. Even so, I simply couldn’t contemplate watching two decades of hard work disappear before my eyes.

But two years have passed and I am so glad that I did not give in to those inner demons. While the effects of the stroke will remain with me, there are positive aspects to be drawn from it. Because I can no longer garden at the same speed as I used to, I notice things that I hadn’t before; because I don’t garden in the same way as I used to, new opportunities have opened up for the garden itself, transforming it into a more relaxed space. Time was when I would trim the grass within an inch of its life. Now I use a ride-on mower – and where it does not reach have created wild areas, encouraging thousands of wildflowers to grow. To think that something so life-giving is a result of a potentially life-threatening event is a salutary lesson.

I never realised when I, my wife Penny and friend Richard committed to opening for the NGS, just how much being part of that organisation would help me overcome the stroke. Encouraging comments from visitors each year are a constant inspiration to develop new ideas and to keep looking forwards. We are not professional gardeners – we simply love this peculiarly wonderful British hobby that pulls people together. I know that through gardening I can forget my condition and move on. Life is as ever-changing as the seasons and we do well to learn great things from that.

For opening details of Michael’s garden at Lewis Cottage, Devon, see: www.ngs.org.uk