

Fragrant Annuals

By Kirk Jones

I began paying more attention to fragrant plants after a friend, who has very particular opinions about everything, dismissed one of my favorite, but mildly scented, daylilies with, “I simply don’t have enough room in my garden to include plants that are *not fragrant*.”

Until then I had certainly noticed that some flowers were more fragrant than others, but it had never occurred to me to have fragrance be a major criteria for choosing what to grow. I was mostly interested in producing as many flowers as possible in colors that didn’t clash too badly. Deciding that here was yet another area of gardening where I was ignorant, I started reading up on fragrant flowers, and then trying them out at my Project Grow plot.

In the past, pleasure gardens were often designed for fragrance. Today, when we are surrounded by artificial scents in soaps, clothing, and even magazines, this focus on scent in the garden can seem kind of quaint. However, after growing a few of these plants, and paying more attention to scent in the garden, I have found there is something truly magical and even spiritual about catching the scent of flowers when just walking past them. It is a special kind of surprise, there one moment and gone with the next breath. Even when you retrace your steps you sometimes can’t locate it again.

All the plants I’m going to discuss here are annuals or tender perennials that can be grown as annuals. Most can be direct sown in the garden, but all can be started inside in a sunny window or under lights 6 or 8 weeks before last frost for earlier blooms.

Fragrant tobaccos (*Nicotiana spp.*)

If you aren’t familiar with nicotianas, you can impress your friends and pronounce their name correctly from the beginning. The correct pronunciation is **ni-ko-she-a’na**, not ni-ko-teen-ia, as I called them for years before I was corrected. You can find nicotiana as plants in stores, but the varieties typically sold, “Domino” or “Nikki Hybrids”, are not fragrant. Fortunately, nicotiana come easily from seed. *Nicotiana alata*, sometimes called Jasmine Tobacco, grows about 2-3 feet tall and produces nodding groups of tubular flowers in white, rose and red. During the day the flowers close up a bit and don’t look like much, nor are they very fragrant. In the evening, however, the flowers open and emit a powerful scent.

The first time I grew *Nicotiana alata*, I planted a 5 x 10 area beside my house solid with them. I still remember getting out of my car one evening and smelling them 30 feet away. If you just grow a few plants, of course, you will probably have to stand closer to smell them, but they are still wonderful.

Nicotiana sylvestris, or woodland tobacco, really looks like a tobacco plant. It forms a rosette of huge basal leaves about a foot or more long. It then sends up a thick flowering stalk, 5 or more feet tall. Long, white, tubular flowers open at the tip of the stalk. The effect is kind of like an exploding Roman candle. The flowers are beautiful day and night, but the fragrance is mainly only around at night. This is not a dainty looking plant, but the scent is.

Recently, I saw this plant at an area nursery for \$6.00 apiece! This is silly because you can get a few hundred seeds for under a buck from Pinetree Garden Seeds (see sources). Plus, all nicotianas self-seed prolifically, so once you plant them you have them forever.

Petunia

I never knew petunias were fragrant until I read about it in a book. Then I started sniffing around petunia flats at nurseries and found it was true. (Yes, people did look at me funny). The white and the dark purple varieties are usually the most fragrant, and again, the fragrance is more pronounced at night.

Evening Stock (*Mattiholia bicornus*)

If I could only grow one fragrant annual it would be evening stock. This is a completely different plant from the clove scented stocks you can find at nurseries. I have never seen evening stock at nurseries or the Farmer's Market. You will have to start them from seed. They will grow well directly sown, but you can also start them early because they don't like hot weather and will sometimes quit flowering or die if the weather gets too hot. If the summer stays fairly cool, they will bloom into September.

As is clear from the name, this is another evening blooming plant. Day or night, it is not much to look at. The small lavender flowers curl up during the day and almost disappear. In the evening, however, they release an intense sweet smell, similar to a lily but without the underlying fetidness many lilies have at close range. I plant about a dozen of these here and there around my patio and that is enough to perfume the entire area on summer nights. They don't take up much room, only growing about a foot tall, so I just stick them in here and there where I can find the room.

Mignonette (*Reseda odorata*)

This plant is only grown for its scent, and the flowers are even homelier than those of evening stock. They look like little greenish-brown bottle brushes about 3 inches long. Mignonette compensates for this dumpy appearance with a sweet perfumey fragrance. This scent is one that I will sometimes catch while working in the garden, but find hard to sense if I directly smell the flowers. Like evening stock, mignonette dislike warm weather and transplanting, so either plant directly early or start early in pots and transplant carefully.

Heliotrope (*Heliotropium arborescens*)

Heliotrope is actually perennial, but flowers the first year from seed if started early. They can be started as early as 12 weeks before the last frost. I never used to see this plant in stores, but lately it has appeared here and there. The flowers are pale to dark purple. The most common seeds found in stores and catalogs are for dwarf varieties like 'Marine'. You can also get seed for taller growing kind from the Fragrant Path (see sources). Heliotrope has a sweet, vanilla or almond like fragrance, rather than a floral one. Like mignonette, the fragrance seems to vary day to day, plant to plant. Ed Rasmussen, of The Fragrant Path, recommends digging up the more fragrant plants and over-wintering them inside, but I've never tried it.

Rasmussen also says that the dwarf varieties are not as sweetly scented. I have never grown both in the same year, so I can't say for sure. However, Sarah started "Marine" this year, and I started some of the taller ones, so we will be holding a heliotrope "smell off" sometime later this summer.

Sources:

The Fragrant Path

Specializing in seeds for fragrant annuals, perennials, herbs and woody plants. \$2.00

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Pinetree Garden Seeds

Free.

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