

Perfume

By R. W. Sidwell

Although few people will admit it, the appreciation of scent in flowers has declined substantially over the last hundred years and the rate of decline has probably increased in recent years.

If one goes back two centuries or more, plants were the only source of perfume for society ladies. The use of aromatic herbs for strewing and placing in linen drawers also was widespread. Nowadays the little bottle from the chemist and the aerosol cannister fulfil those purposes. The linen drawer is likely to contain paradichlorbenzene if moths are to be discouraged. The modern synthetic fibres will have no need even for this.

We will not dwell longer on the tastes and fashions of the past, and not criticise the lack of perfume in so many modern flowers. But let us look at some shrubs and other plants which are worth a place in our gardens for scent along.

I am writing this article in the last week of January 1979 with snow on the ground outside. Under a large purple-leaved filbert — purple-leaved in the summer of course — is an evergreen shrub a yard or so high, with glossy leaves about the size of privet. On its winter twigs it has little clusters of whitish flowers just breaking from their buds. I will shortly go out and cut a few shoots and within an hour, in a warm room, the perfume of hyacinths will pervade the house.

The shrub is *Sarcococca confusa* which few summer visitors bother to look at twice. If they do, the most they are likely to notice is that it is planted to hide an inspection cover of the drainage system. This and others of its genus are among the most highly-perfumed of winter and spring-flowering plants. They are plants for the discerning few who look for something other than gaudy colour.

Better known and a little more showy, is the winter sweet *Chimonanthus praecox* with its honey-coloured purple-centred flowers. It takes several years to attain flowering state and its rather coarse foliage does not add much to the summer garden, but it deserves the degree of popularity it has.

In the front rank of scented shrubs, and in this case flowering in early summer, are the species and cultivars of *Philadelphus*. These are mock oranges, so called because of the slight resemblance to the true orange blossom in perfume and appearance.

The wild forms are found throughout the Northern hemisphere. *Philadelphus coronarius* is the oldest in cultivation and probably originated in Eastern Europe. It is still a worthwhile species with a very heavy scent.

For small gardens I would suggest *P. x Lemoinei* which is a hybrid with *P. microphyllus*. It can easily be kept below five feet in height, and bears rather small highly-scented flowers in great profusion. A wider spreading but still compact grower is "Belle Etoile". This has large flowers with a purple blotch in the centre. A somewhat larger and less compact shrub is the Chinese species *P. delavayi*, originally discovered by that great Jesuit missionary the Abbe Delavay in 1887.

We owe many fine Chinese plants to this gentleman who combined missionary work with botanical exploration of the highest order. The perfume of this species is quite distinct and very powerful. If you can get the form with the purple calyx you will have an uncommon and superb shrub. The double cultivar, "Virginal," is commonly sold. I consider it to be quite second-rate. It makes long bare shoots which even careful pruning cannot conceal.

Of more delicate perfume is the Himalayan "Beauty Bush" (*Kolkwitzia amabilis*). This is a large sprawling shrub soon getting six feet high by ten feet across, but it can be kept in bounds by pruning just after flowering, which is also in early summer. This would still hold its own in the top ten shrubs even if it were scentless. The funnel-shaped flowers are pink, with yellow spotting in the throat.

Choisya ternata, the Mexican Orange, is a true relative of the orange. Its ternate evergreen foliage is strongly aromatic when crushed. Its smell is reminiscent of nutmeg. The white flowers are borne in profusion in the spring and have a distinct perfume, strong but not sickly. After a hot summer, or perhaps more correctly, a bright sunny summer, a heavy crop of autumn flowers may be borne. This shrub will tolerate considerable shade but maximum flowering is obtained only with good light.

Azara microphylla is usually seen as a large shrub but it can be a small tree in favoured situations. It is a little tender. The small evergreen leaves are borne in elegant sprays and in the early spring are mixed with clusters of yellow vanilla-scented flowers. It is an excellent plant for the sheltered corner.

The daphnes include many with highly-perfumed flowers. Some are plants for the specialist, but the one known as "Burkwoodii," or sometimes listed as "Somerset," is an easy-to-grow shrub three to four feet high with pink flowers in early summer. It is a garden hybrid.

The brooms include some well-perfumed shrubs. Two species flowering in mid- to late summer are *Genista aetnensis*, the Mount Etna Broom, and *G. cinerea* from the Western Mediterranean. Both are large shrubs and require an open sunny site. *Cytisus battandieri*, the Pineapple Broom, is also a large summer flowering shrub but it is not the easiest to grow and it requires a sheltered site.

Skimmias are noted for their perfume and some for their fruits. A favourite of mine is "Rubella," which is a non-fruiting male clone of hybrid origin. Its red buds are conspicuous throughout the winter and in early spring the cream, highly-scented flowers are borne. It flowers when six inches high and very slowly grows to a height of three to four feet.



Viburnum bodnantense: sweet-scented, winter-flowering.