



Gardening with South African Plants

Fragrant plants in the garden

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Fragrance adds an extra dimension to the garden. When we pay attention to the scents and aromas wafting around us, a new world opens up. Scents can change a mood, induce feelings, trigger memories, make new ones, and entice one down the garden path.

Clever use of scented and aromatic plants can turn any garden into an enchanting place.

Fragrant foliage

The core of a fragrant garden has to be plants with aromatic foliage. Most aromatic plants release their scent when touched, so plant them where they are most likely to be brushed against, such as beside paths, steps and gateways, in between paving stones, or in easy reach beside a bench, in raised beds or in window boxes. Some also scent the air around them, especially on warm, windless days.

Next time you are shopping for plants, rub their leaves and have a sniff. Pick out those with scents that you like. There are many to choose from:

Pelargoniums are rewarding garden plants with showy flowers and beautiful foliage, and many have aromatic leaves, in an astonishing range of scents, including **rose** (*Pelargonium capitatum*, *P. graveolens* and *P. radens*), **peppermint** (*P. tomentosum*), **lemon** (*P. citronellum* and *P. crispum*), **camphor** (*P. exstipulatum* and *P. betulinum*), **nutmeg** (*P. 'Fragrans'*) and **balsam** (*P. glutinosum*, *P. panduriforme* and *P. quercifolium*), and many more have their own unique fragrance.

Add them to sunny beds and borders, and give them well-composted soil and moderate water. They are also excellent container plants. Pelargonium leaves can be used in potpourri, to flavour puddings, jams, soft drinks, or alcoholic drinks, and as skin softeners.



The **Rose Pelargonium**, *Pelargonium capitatum*, is fragrant, beautiful and useful, and easy to grow.



Wild Rosemary, *Eriocephalus africanus*, is a shrub with a lovely arching habit, decorative white flowers, cotton-woolly fruits and aromatic, felty grey leaves that can be used in cooking to flavour food or to make herbal teas. Use the woolly fruits as fragrant stuffing for pillows and cushions. It's water-wise and easy to grow.



Tyrian Purple Sagebush, *Syncolostemon* 'Tyrian Purple'.

Wild Sages and Sagebushes, aromatic shrubby perennials in the Sage Family, are superb garden plants, bringing colour and fragrance to the garden.

There has to be a **Wild Sage** that suits every garden, from the blues and purples of the **Blue Wild Sages**, *Salvia africana-caerulea* and *S. chamelaeagnea*, the lilac pink flowers and grey foliage of **Dolomite Wild Sage**, *S. dolomitica* to the orange-gold flowers and blue-grey foliage of **Golden Sage**, *S. africana-aurea*. They are decorative garden shrubs and their aromatic foliage is safe to use in cooking, to flavour food.

Sagebushes are aromatic shrubby perennials with showy summer flowers. The most outstanding is **Tyrian Purple**, *Syncolostemon densiflorus x rotundifolius* 'Tyrian Purple', with its 1.5 m tall stems topped with deep pink and purple, late summer and autumn flowerheads. But don't overlook the dainty **Grey-haired Sagebush**, *Syncolostemon canescens*, with its unusual fruity coconut scented leaves. Sagebushes need fertile soil and a sunny spot with lots of water in summer, and can be cut back in winter, after flowering, and they will resprout strongly in the spring

Spurflowers, also from the Sage Family, are mostly shade-loving plants that lack strongly aromatic leaves, but the exception is the **Smelly Spurflower**, *Plectranthus neochilus*, which is happy in sun or semi-shade, water-wise, easy to grow and propagate, and flowers almost continually. Its leaves are strongly aromatic, although not everyone's idea of pleasant.



Kluitjieskraal False Buchu, *Agathosma ovata* 'Kluitjieskraal'.

No fragrant garden is complete without a **buchu** or two. These Citrus Family shrubs are ideal for fynbos gardens in the winter-rainfall area but many also do well in summer-rainfall gardens provided their soil is well drained and they are in a sunny, airy spot that does not get heavy frost.

Each kind of Buchu has its own distinctive scent. The **Anise Buchu, *Agathosma ciliaris***, and **Coast Anise Buchu, *A. cerefolium***, smell like aniseed, **Sand Buchu, *A. glabrata***, has a citrusy tang, **Prickly Buchu, *A. mucronulata***, has a whiff of turpentine, and **Thyme Buchu, *A. serpyllacea***, has a herby scent, while **Cape May, *Coleonema album***, smells like nutmeg, but most are hard to define, or smell like seaside summer holidays!

The **False Buchu, *Agathosma ovata***, is one of the easiest to grow, it is a variable shrub with masses of white to mauve flowers in winter to spring. There are many varieties to choose from, from the 0.5 m tall, pink flowered '**Kluitjieskraal**' to the 2 m tall, white flowered '**Outeniqua**'.

Break off a sprig and rub the leaves between your hands or on your skin, tuck it in a pocket and carry their perfume with you.

Their leaves and fruits are excellent in potpourri.



Lots of helichrysums, particularly the '**most fragrant**' ***Helichrysum odoratissimum***, have showy yellow flowerheads and strongly fragrant leaves, which are used in many traditional remedies.

Fragrant flowers in the garden

The fragrance of flowers changes through the seasons, and with the time of day. Scatter plants with fragrant flowers throughout the garden and try to vary the flowering season so that there is interest throughout the year. Choose plants that smell stronger on summer evenings to enhance the garden after sunset.

A fragrant shrub or tree is particularly effective near a garden bench where one can take the time to appreciate it. Try the heavily perfumed **Wild Gardenia**, *Gardenia thunbergia*, a slow-growing, long-lived, stocky shrub with glossy dark green foliage, pale grey bark and large white summer flowers that look as good as they smell. Or the **Bride's Bush**, *Pavetta lanceolata*, whose sweet-smelling flowers turn the whole bush white in midsummer. Shady benches can also be fragrant, with a **Kamassi**, *Gonioma kamassi*, planted nearby. It is an understory shrub or small tree with heavily scented white flowers almost all year round, but it needs water in summer.



Wild Gardenia, *Gardenia thunbergia*, has heavily perfumed flowers in mid to late summer.



Bride's Bush, *Pavetta lanceolata*, fragrant flowers turn the canopy white in midsummer.

Not all fragrant flowers are as pretty as they smell. Some, like those of the **Bladder Nut**, *Diospyros whyteana*, are quite small and inconspicuous, the kind of plant you smell as you pass but don't notice the flowers. The Bladder Nut is a small evergreen tree with glossy foliage and in late summer, it bears balloon-like fruits that are very popular with the birds.



Bladder Nut, *Diospyros whyteana*, has inconspicuous sweetly fragrant flowers in early summer.



Golden Pagoda, *Mimetes chrysanthus*, flowers have a soft sweet scent.

Spiderheads, *Serruria* species, have softly sweet-scented flowerheads. A good one for the garden is the **Northern Spiderhead, *Serruria fucifolia*,** which is a bushy little shrub with pretty silver-pink flower heads in winter-spring.

The **Gordon's Bay Pincushion, *Leucospermum bolusii*,** a rounded shrub with whitish flowerheads in late spring, is one of a few fragrant pincushions.

Many **Conebushes, *Leucadendron* species,** are scented, ranging from spicy, to fruity or sweet, to yeasty to quite foul smelling. One of the strongest is the **Spicy Conebush, *Leucadendron tinctum*.** Conebushes don't have the showy flowers of proteas and pincushions, but make up for it with colourful foliage and decorative cones.



Gordon's Bay Pincushion, *Leucospermum bolusii*, has strongly fragrant flowers in spring and early summer.

Softly fragrant flowers

Some fragrant flowers don't scent the air around them but they surprise you with their soft sweet scent when you go up close and have a sniff, such as the **Golden Pagoda, *Mimetes chrysanthus*,** a rare fynbos shrub and a member of the Protea Family.

Fragrant proteas

Although not known for their fragrance, there are a few fragrant Protea Family shrubs. The fragrant ones are attracting insects to visit and pollinate their flowers, whereas the unscented flowers are calling on the birds.



Northern Spiderhead, *Serruria fucifolia*, has softly sweet-scented flowerheads in winter and spring.



Spicy Conebush, *Leucadendron tinctum* (female) has strongly scented flowerheads in winter and spring.

Fragrant flowers through the seasons

Choose plants that flower in different seasons and scatter them through the garden and there will be something delightful to smell almost all year round.



Keurboom, *Virgilia divaricata*, flowers in spring to early summer.



Small Num-num, *Carissa edulis*, flowers in spring and summer, and has edible fruits.



Sagewood, *Buddleja salviifolia*, flowers in winter and spring, and also makes a good screen or windbreak.



Kamassi, *Gonioma kamassi*, flowers in summer, and is suitable for a position in semi-shade.



Forest Elder, *Nuxia floribunda*, flowers in autumn and winter.

Fragrant flowers in pots

Bulbous plants with fragrant flowers can be cut for the vase or grown in pots and taken indoors to enjoy their fragrance.

Try the strongly fragrant, spring-flowering **Wild Freesia**, *Freesia leichtlinii* subsp. *alba*, or the autumn flowering **Belladonna Lily**, *Amaryllis belladonna*. The **Pineapple Flowers**, *Eucomis autumnalis*, *E. comosa* and the many hybrids and cultivars now available at garden centres, have interesting sweet or spicy scents, and mostly flower in midsummer. And there's the **Sweet Wild Garlic**, *Tulbaghia simmleri*, that has sweet-scented flowers but lacks the stinking leaves of its sibling the Wild Garlic, *Tulbaghia violacea*.



Sweet Wild Garlic, *Tulbaghia simmleri*, has strongly fragrant flowers and leaves that don't smell of garlic.



The **Yellow Stars Saffron Bush, *Gnidia squarrosa*** 'Yellow Stars', is a willowy, water-wise shrub, with balls of yellow flowers in autumn, winter and spring, well suited to coastal and fynbos gardens.

Fragrant climbers

A fragrant climber is wonderful over an arch or pergola, where the scent surrounds you.

Wild Jasmine, *Jasminum angulare*, and **Starry Wild Jasmine, *J. multipartitum***, can be a bit slow to get going but will reward you with strongly fragrant white flowers almost all summer long. Give them well-composted soil and moderate water.

The **Sickle Thorn, *Asparagus falcatus***, has glossy dark green foliage and masses of tiny but strongly scented white flowers in summer, but beware, it also has wicked thorns and is a vigorous grower.

Traveller's Joy, *Clematis brachiata*, and **Port St Johns Creeper, *Podranea ricasoliana***, also have fragrant summer flowers.



Wild Jasmine, *Jasminum angulare*.

Night-scented flowers

Plant evening or night-scented plants beside the veranda, patio or outdoor entertainment area, or outside a window where their scent can be enjoyed in the evenings.

Some of the strongest night-scented flowers are **Sweet Gonna, *Struthiola dodecandra*** and ***S. ciliata***, and **Saffron Bush, *Gnidia squarrosa***, which have earned the common name Juffertjie-roer-by-die-nag or 'Young-lady-gad-about-at-night'. Imagine walking in the garden just after sunset and the strongest sweetest perfume hangs on the air, as if someone, all dressed up for a night out, walked the path moments before you and left a whiff of their perfume in the air.

These dainty shrubs with their white or pale yellow, tubular flowers are attracting their night-flying moth pollinators, and are completely unscented during the day.

Find out more about the featured plants: (sorted alphabetically by botanical name)

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