
LAYERS
OF THE
GARDEN:
SUMMER
FRAGRANCE

Table of Contents

The Fragrance Layer

Fragrance is the garden layer you cannot photograph, map, or measure — and yet it may be the one that stays with you longest. The scent of a summer garden is not incidental: it is a living, dynamic, ecologically purposeful layer all its own.

Every gardener knows the feeling: you step outside on a warm June evening and something stops you. It is not color or a form, but a scent that reaches you before you can name its source. Fragrance works on us in ways that vision does not. It bypasses the analytical brain and lands in memory and emotion, which is why a single whiff of lavender can return you instantly to a place you visited decades ago.

From the plant's perspective, fragrance is not about our pleasure. It is a sophisticated chemical communication system. A broadcast signal aimed at specific pollinators, timed to coincide with their activity, modulated by temperature and humidity for maximum reach. Night-scented flowers produce their strongest perfumes after dusk, precisely when their moth pollinators are flying. Day-scented roses peak in the warm late morning when bumblebees are most active. Fragrance is a layer of the garden that is perpetually, invisibly, in conversation with the animal world.

Your Year at a Glance

~~January: Winter Structure~~
~~February: Alpine Plants~~
~~March: Special Treasures for Early Spring~~
~~April: Moss Gardening~~
~~May: Edible Flowers~~
June: Summer Fragrance Plants
July: Weed Control
August: Late Summer Vines
September: Ornamental Seed Heads
October: Late Fireworks
November: Texture, Evergreen Anchors, Preparing the Base Layer (Soil)
December: Conifers

The Science of Scent

Plant fragrance is produced by molecules that evaporate readily at ambient temperatures and travel through the air to reach their target. Different classes of compounds produce different scent profiles, which is how our senses determine what exactly is causing the smell we are detecting.

Why Some Flowers Have Lost Their Scent

Many modern hybrid flowers (particularly roses, sweet peas, and carnations) have been bred for visual impact at the expense of fragrance. The genes controlling petal color and scent production draw on some of the same biochemical pathways, so selecting for color has inadvertently depleted fragrance compounds. This is why an antique rose will often out-perfume a vivid modern hybrid many times over!

Temperature, Humidity & Scent Release

Fragrance compounds are more volatile, and therefore more perceptible, at higher temperatures. This is why a warm, still summer evening amplifies scent so dramatically compared with a cool, breezy day. Humidity also plays a role: moist air carries scent molecules further and holds them longer. The hour after summer rain on a warm evening is often the most powerfully scented moment in the garden year.

Tips for Maximum Fragrance:

- Position night-scented plants near seating areas and open windows to be able to enjoy them at their peak fragrance.
- Hard surfaces absorb heat and release it slowly, warming the air around nearby fragrant plants into the evening.
- Enclosed spaces concentrate scent compared with open, windy sites.
- Plants in containers can be moved wherever they will be best enjoyed!

The Memory of Scent

The olfactory nerve connects directly to the limbic system (the brain's emotional and memory center) bypassing the rational cortex entirely. No other sense has such immediate access to our deepest memories. This is why fragrant planting creates gardens that are remembered long after visual impressions have faded, and why the scent of a particular plant can carry a lifetime's associations in a single breath.

Spotlight: Lavandula

If a single plant defines the scent of the summer garden in the PNW, it is lavender. Hardy, drought-tolerant, beloved by pollinators, and astonishingly versatile, Lavandula is the fragrant layer made visible. Its clean, herbal-floral scent is arguably one of the most universally recognized plant fragrances on earth, and for good reason: it is complex, calming, and wholly unmistakable.

Understanding the Genus

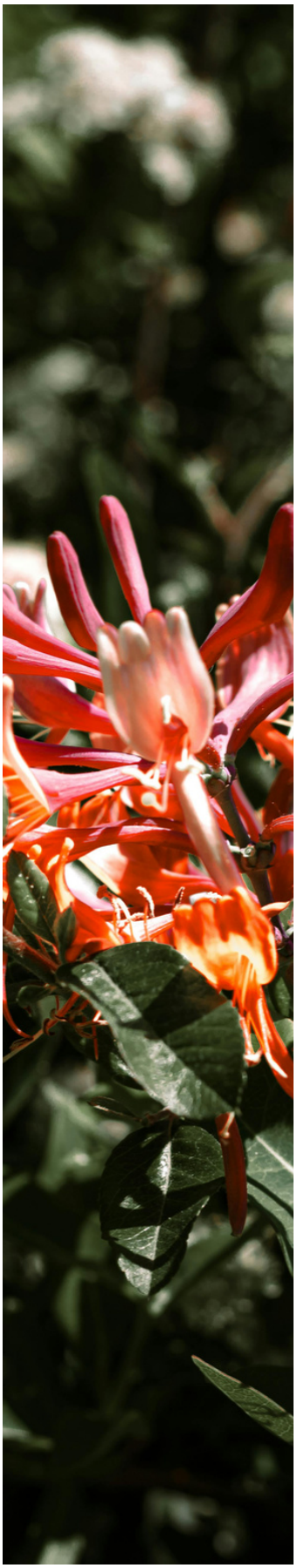
The genus Lavandula contains around 47 species, but the garden varieties most gardeners grow fall into a handful of key groups. Knowing the differences matters — they vary significantly in hardiness, fragrance intensity, flowering season, and use.

- Lavandula angustifolia (English)
  - The hardiest and most fragrant; compact mounds to 18"; flowers June–July; excellent for drying, cooking, and borders.
    - Varieties: 'Hidcote', 'Munstead', 'Alba'
- Lavandula x intermedia
  - Hybrid of angustifolia and latifolia; taller (to 30”); long flower spikes July–August; high oil yield; superb for large borders.
    - Varieties: 'Grosso', 'Provence'
- Lavandula stoechas (French/Spanish lavender)
  - Distinctive 'rabbit ear' bracts; potential earlier flowering (may varieties start in May); less hardy (Zone 6/7+); beautiful in containers.
    - Varieties: ‘Anouk’ series, ‘Otto Quast’, ‘The Princess’

Lavender's needs are straightforward but non-negotiable: sharp drainage, full sun, and lean soil. In the PNW, where winter wet is the primary killer, positioning and soil preparation are everything. Raised beds, south-facing slopes, and generous grit incorporation transform marginal spots into lavender-perfect conditions.

The Fragrance Palette

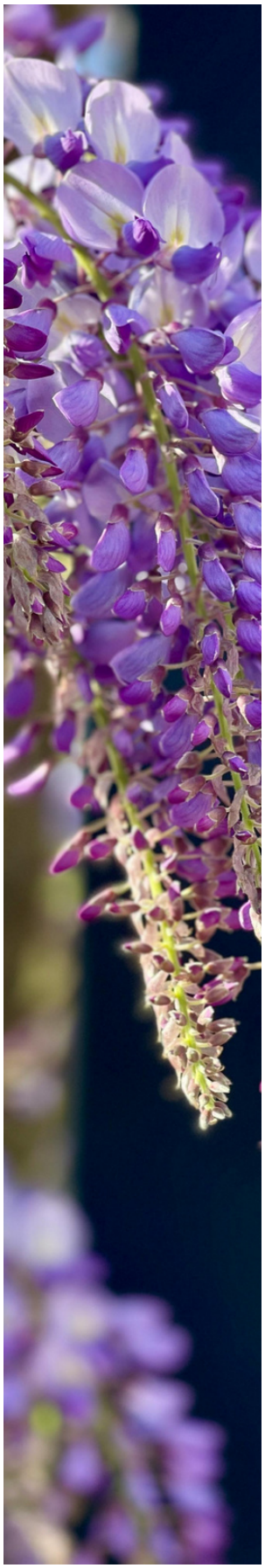
Beyond roses, the summer fragrant garden offers an extraordinary range of scent profiles and ecological value.



Scent Profile, Peak Scent Time, & Design Notes

- **Dianthus**
  - Scent Profile: Spicy clove
  - Peak Scent Time: Midday, June-July
  - Design: Cottage garden; rock gardens; borders
- **Heliotrope**
  - Scent Profile: Cherry pie, vanilla
  - Peak Scent Time: All day, summer
  - Design: Half-hardy; great in containers
- **Lavandula**
  - Scent Profile: Herbal, clean, calming
  - Peak Scent Time: Midday, midsummer
  - Design: Drought-tolerant; excellent for bees
- **Lonicera**
  - Scent Profile: Honey and vanilla
  - Peak Scent Time: Evening, June-September
  - Design: Superb when trained over arches
- **Nicotiana**
  - Scent Profile: Heavy, exotic, sweet
  - Peak Scent Time: Dusk to dawn, Night-scented
  - Design: tall and architectural; self-seeds freely
- **Sweet Pea**
  - Scent Profile: Classic 'sweet pea' — sweet
  - Peak Scent Time: Evening
  - Design: Biennial; colonises freely
- **Wisteria**
  - Scent Profile: Light grape/vanilla
  - Peak Scent Time: Morning, Late May to June
  - Design: Brief bloom, but spectacular; train carefully

Designing with Fragrance & Scent Through the Summertime



Fragrance in the garden rewards deliberate placement. Unlike color, which works at a distance, scent is experienced typically within 6-15' of the plant. Design with this in mind.

The Fragrant Path

Paths are the most powerful tool for delivering fragrance. Planting scented plants along the edges of a path means that every passage becomes a sensory event. Low-growing fragrant plants between stepping stones release scent underfoot, while taller plants engage you at chest and face level.

- Frame gates and doorways with climbers, such as honeysuckle or jasmine.
- Position night-scented plants within reach of windows and seating areas.
- Use fragrant hedges to create scented enclosures.

The Evening Garden

Perhaps the most rewarding approach is to design explicitly for the evening. Night-scented plants are often visually modest, but come alive after dusk. White and cream flowers reflect moonlight and retain their visibility after sunset. Combining them with night-scented flowers creates a garden that performs during a magical hour.

Seasonal Shifts: Scent Through the Summertime

- Late Spring-Early Summer (May-June)
  - Dianthus, Gardenia, Herbs, Lavandula, Lonicera, Rosa, Stock, Sweet Pea, Trachelospermum, Wisteria
- Mid-Late Summer (July–August)
  - Agastache, Dianthus, Gardenia, Heliotrope, Lavandula, Lilium, Nicotiana, Rosa

Next Month Preview

In July, we will give a more nuanced (and far less exhausting) descent to one of the garden's most contested layers — the ground itself, and the plants that fight to colonize it without invitation. Weed control is rarely discussed as a design or ecological question, but in every garden and landscape, it is both. We will explore the difference between plants that are simply unwanted and those that are genuinely harmful, examine how a garden's weed flora reflects the health of its soil, and look at the full toolkit of cultural, physical, and ecological approaches to management.

Understanding what your weeds are telling you (about compaction, fertility, drainage, and disturbance) transforms weed control from a chore into a diagnostic exercise, and opens the door to a garden that needs far less intervention over time.