

Garden allure through sense of smell

I got ambushed by a powerful fragrance while busting out of the cabin for an early evening walk around the neighborhood. It was cloyingly sweet.

Though the mid-April cool snap dampened the smell of my banana shrub, which my grandmother called *Magnolia fuscata* but has now been renamed *Michelia figo*, it's still the best month for those of us who love the waftings from *Magnolia*, *honeysuckle*, and *star* or *confederate jasmine*.

But some, especially the weedy Chinese privet and more statuesque wax *Ligustrum*, can be real olfactory thugs.

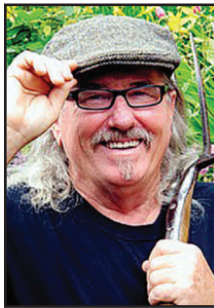
I got a strong whiff long before I saw its large clusters of pure white flowers glowing in the dusk; in fact, its bouquet all but forced me to look for it. This is what garden fragrance is for, and it worked as I almost swooned with its overpowering fra-

grance hanging in the thickly humid gloom.

Scientists think fragrance helps attract some insects and bats looking for food or mates, and repels others that might find the plants munchable. The volatile oils are as incredibly varied as the critters they attract; sometimes the differences are so subtle they attract only a tiny percent of the available pollinators, in ways we humans have yet to understand.

While mere brushing through the leaves of my sprawling *lantana*, *oregano*, *mint*, and *rosemary* planted beside walks can release *eau de jardin*, fragrance from flowers requires warmth; heat causes blossoms, freshly mowed lawns, freshly picked tomatoes, and freshly disturbed earth to release volatile oils which hang mid-air in our humidity, waiting for our noses to be thrust into them.

No matter, I enjoy them for



FELDER RUSHING



Magnolia, honeysuckle, Ligustrum, and jasmine April quartet.

the allure and the memories. When I smell some, I am taken back in spirit to my earliest garden memories. Banana shrub and jonquils

conjure an innocent childhood spent poking around behind my horticulturist great-grandmother; four o'clocks sharply focus the

year we lived with my grandmother in a double-wide shotgun shack in the Delta while my combat Marine dad was freezing in Korea. *Eleagnus* and *sweet olive* are Autumn favorites.

To be honest, I think the *Spirea* and *Pyracantha* in bloom now reek of dirty socks, and nothing compares with the oddity I grow in the leafy woodland soil of my back garden, a deep burgundy "voodoo lily" (*Amorphophallus konjac*) whose stench exactly mimics rotting meat, the better to attract pollinating flies and beetles. And repelling gardeners.

But this week there is a sickly-sweet confluence of aromas in my garden and neighborhood, almost enough to make me queasy. The roses are okay, because I have to get really close to them. But there's a slight citrusy conspiracy going on between *Magnolia*, *confederate jasmine*, *Ligustrum*, and *honeysuckle*; though each has its own signature attar, I can barely tell them apart when they are biffing my nose all at one time. Only

consolation I have is that the gardenia is not pumping out its excessive floral essence - yet. Thankfully it comes in the heat of summer, without even a close competitor!

Garden fragrances are evocative, but those with less nuance can easily combine into an overpowering excess. Still, while our more northern garden friends are forever connected to one another through lilacs, I'm grateful to know that for the rest of their lives my children, whenever they smell flowers we've all been raised with, will think of their Dad, and at least in their minds and hearts they will be transported to their Mississippi upbringing.

Here's hoping that, years from now as flower fragrances summon them mentally to their childhood home, they don't curl their lips and hold their noses when the *Ligustrum* kick in.

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