

The learning curve

Val Bourne

It's not often balmy in Cold Aston and last year the garden didn't even start until about May. One wag sent me a thank-you letter following a gardening lunch in late-March when nothing was up. The envelope simply read *Almost Spring Cottage in Cold, Cold Aston*. I should have framed it. When spring did arrive it stayed cold and my trilliums, erythroniums and tulips (all things that go over quickly in heat) were freeze-framed for weeks right through May. I bought a sheepskin jerkin at Chelsea, unable to stand the cold, but back here, *Polystichum* and *Dryopteris* fronds hung in the air, curled up like newborn puppies. They were beautiful when dew spangled their crossiers.

And then along came summer, a proper summer for once, if a little late. It defied the weather forecasters who often said the day would crack up later on. In fact we hung on to the sun for weeks, despite the gloomy prognosis, and it was actually warm even here. No one sent me a letter addressed *Spring Cottage at Not So Cold Aston* though. The sunny days, without a breath of wind, seemed to go on forever and I was reacquainted with the power of fragrance once again. It was a reminder of how important scent is for the gardener's soul. There's nothing quite as pleasurable or soothing, it flows through you in an instant. Indeed the word nanosecond might have been made to go hand in hand with fragrance.

The first time it really struck home was in early June. Having been desk bound, I went out around four o'clock in the afternoon. The heavy-headed peonies, mostly *Paeonia lactiflora* cultivars, were slightly faded by the perpetual sun. They had swooned gently in the heat and stood softly still. When I breathed in, purely through the pleasure of seeing them, I got coconut and lemon on the air. A pale pink bomb-shaped peony provided the coconut cocktail, but sadly I have no name. My peony addiction has led me to plant thirty or so, some from a National Collection. Others have been handed on, their names long since lost. I can tell you that the fruity citrus scent came from 'Duchesse de Nemours', a creamy-white full peony with enough of a hint of yellow to avoid looking glacial.



Fig. 1 Our native woodbine, *Lonicera periclymenum*

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Scent is important to me. I always grow a variety of scented-leaved pelargoniums, lemon verbena (*Aloysia citrodora*) and cherry pie (or heliotrope) right by the front of the house close to a seat. They are stroked and their scent inhaled, although I once got a terrible headache describing and sniffing 30 different plants for an article. ‘Attar of Roses’ is my favourite pelargonium – it has a rose scent and tactile foliage, bright-green and slightly cupped, so it’s the gardening equivalent of the perfumed teddy bear. But it’s lemon verbena I love most, the one that smells like a sherbert dab. One sniff and I’m rollerskating through the park in the London suburb where I grew up, aged nine and probably with a dirty plaster on my knee. I’m almost certainly late for tea.

Honeysuckle is another plant I must grow and our native woodbine, *Lonicera periclymenum* (fig. 1), is the most scented of all. The light floral concoction takes me straight back to my nursing cadet days in Leamington Spa: waltzing down the main steps, something only matron was allowed to do, and into an open-topped sports car

and on to the tiny lanes of Warwickshire to speed through the clouds of moths. Honeysuckle grew abundantly and had done since Shakespeare’s day. Oberon talks about a bank ‘over-canopied with luscious woodbine’ in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.

In the garden *L. periclymenum* can be slow to establish, taking several years to make a convincing plant. The long trumpets usually come in rhubarb and custard colours and ‘Belgica’ (or Early Dutch honeysuckle) is typical. ‘Serotina’

Fig. 2 *Azara microphylla*

is a stronger red though generally not so admired. The paler white and custard-yellow ‘Sweet Sue’, named by Roy Lancaster after his lovely wife, was discovered in Sweden.

There is also a yellow-flowered greyer-leaved honeysuckle named ‘Graham Thomas’, found by the great man himself flowering away in a Warwickshire copse one October. Like many scented plants with slender-necked trumpets the fragrance deepens in the evening when long-tongued moths appear to raid the nectar. The brasher American honeysuckles have no scent at all, principally because they are pollinated by hummingbirds rather than insects.

It’s said that scent takes you straight back to the experience and whenever I smell the vanilla-scented flowers of *Azara microphylla* (fig. 2). I find myself standing in Terry Dagley’s Worcestershire garden where I first saw this rather plain Chilean plant in 1995. I had to have this leggy wall shrub at Spring Cottage but, sadly, the builders removed it because after three years it had become a triffid. We have no footings to the oldest part



of our cottage so triflids are not allowed, even if they smell of Mary Berry and vanilla.

Clusters of stamens, such as those of the azara, often yield a strong scent and the sarcococcas cannot be beaten. The strongest scent definitely belongs to *Sarcococca hookeriana* var. *digyna*. The flowers, clusters of pink stamens, pack a powerful lily scent. However the foliage has the metallic look of a starved plant, like box on a hunger strike. I much prefer the ivory-white flowers of *S. confusa* with its luscious rich-green foliage. One sniff and I'm at Ness Gardens again, trying to pin down the source of the fragrance before realising it's coming from a tiny plant right by a door. I bought my first *S. confusa* there and then in 1998 and, confined to a warm car on the way home, it gave my passenger a headache.

Now that the azara has had to go, I've planted two dwarf Korean lilacs in large containers. The green foliage and delicate pink-mauve flowers of *Syringa pubescens* subsp. *patula* 'Miss Kim' (fig. 3) have a heady, all-pervading scent in early summer, and there are many more dainty lilacs with an equally strong scent. The showier tree lilacs, named forms of *S. vulgaris*, are much poorer on scent, although lovely to cut for the house.



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Fig. 3 *Syringa pubescens* subsp. *patula* 'Miss Kim'

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The last plant of the year that I get to bury my nose in is a non-climbing clematis now named *Clematis tubulosa* 'Wyevale'. The sweetly scented blue flowers have recurved petals that seem to invite butterflies to have a drink and they willingly oblige. The flowers stand out well, reaching three feet or so, its habit lax but self-supporting. I also grow *C. heracleifolia* 'Cassandra' and both shine in September.

I'm not sad when autumn turns to winter for soon my witch hazels, or hamamelis, will flower. I've finally established the freesia-scented 'Pallida'. Not all witch hazels are as pleasant, though – some smell of lavatory cleaner.

Then in summer come the border phloxes. The three-year RHS trial, which I helped judge, was an enormous success. The pink cultivars seemed especially fragrant and *Phlox paniculata* 'Bright Eyes' (palish pink flowers with a bright-pink eye) remains a personal favourite. Its young foliage is healthy with dark overtones. In years to come I'll remember the summer of phloxes at Wisley – every time I smell that grassy, sweet perfume. 🌸

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