

Four Fragrant Favorites

Flowers use scent to attract pollinators. Or, as one scientist put it: “Plants use volatiles to solve fundamental problems that result from their immobility: dispersing offspring and gametes and attracting mates.” Co-evolution with specific pollinators leads to fragrant compounds being dispersed when those pollinators are most active: daytime for butterflies and bees, nighttime for moths and bats.

Powerful scent

Fragrant flowers have nearly universal appeal, and some are iconic.

Jasmine is so familiar for its scent that plants that are similar often carry the species name ‘jasminoides’ which literally means ‘like jasmine’.

Gardenias (*Gardenia jasminoides*) have a spicy pungency; they are traditional for nosegays and bridal bouquets.

Honeysuckles and lilies are known for their sweet evening fragrance.

For any plant you wish to grow, all you need to know is how it differs from other plants with respect to:

- sunlight
- amount of water needed.
- special soil conditions
- possibly protection from pests or weather.

Gardenia

Gardenias have extremely fragrant flowers and shiny leaves on shrubs that range from two to five feet or so.

- Sun: Gardenias bloom best with at least four to six hours of sun each day, but the foliage looks best here if the plants are sheltered from the hottest afternoon sun. An east exposure is ideal, or the light shade of a high tree. In deeper shade the plants grow fine but don’t flower well.
- Watering: in smaller containers gardenias may need water nearly every day in the summer. In the ground they’re much less fussy. A thorough soaking every few days is usually adequate.
- Gardenias prefer soils with pH below 7.0, and often show nutrient deficiencies that are attributed to alkaline soils.
- Protection needed? Nope. Aphids may show up in late spring, but usually run their course without injury to the plant. Gardenias are winter hardy in our area.
- Grow as a houseplant? Not optimal. You don’t have enough light indoors, and they are shrubs that want to have a large root system. A flowering gardenia in a small container can be enjoyed for a few weeks indoors, but ultimately, they need more light. If you must grow them indoors, consider adding a grow light above the leaves.
- Grow in containers? Most varieties get too big to sustain in pots for more than a couple of years. A half-barrel that holds 3 cubic feet of soil would be the bare minimum to grow them for several years. But don’t despair: there is a dwarf gardenia (‘Radicans’) suited to smaller containers that grows to just a couple of feet tall and wide. It has small leaves, a dense growth habit, and small flowers, but they’re just as sweet smelling as their bigger counterparts. It sometimes has variegated leaves.
- Problems:



- Bud drop. Gardenias continue to initiate flower buds on warm sunny days, even as the nights get too cold for them to sustain the blossoms. It's normal for the flower buds to drop off without opening when nights start dropping below about 50 degrees F.
- Yellowing leaves. Older leaves yellowing indicates a need for nitrogen. New growth yellowing can be due to micronutrient deficiency, watering too often, or poor water quality. Gardeners like to pamper gardenias with enriched compost, and light feeding with soluble plant food, and that does give better growth and deeper green leaves. Our water here is alkaline, so it can be helpful to apply soil sulphur seasonally.
- New and improved types: several years ago, some nurseries began grafting *Gardenia jasminoides* onto a vigorous tropical species, *Gardenia thunbergiana*. The resulting plants grow much faster and stronger and seem to show less nutrient deficiency. A gardener in El Macero who planted these grafted gardenias several years ago reports that he must prune them with hedge shears to control the size.

Jasmine

Jasmine flowers contain a mix of volatile oils that have a very familiar sweet, spicy scent.

There are many species in the genus *Jasminum*.

The 'true' jasmine used in tea, leis in Hawai'i, and perfume is *Jasminum sambac*, also called Arabian jasmine, and there are some other species grown in Asia for medicinal purposes. Sambac, alas, is too cold tender to grow here. But there are several species which are nearly as fragrant that we can grow.

Hardy types include the powerfully sweet-scented *Jasminum polyanthum*, which blooms heavily for a few weeks in spring, or the more lightly fragrant *Jasminum angulare*, which hails from South Africa and blooms off and on through the warm season.

Jasmines are evergreen vines, often with great vigor. Your main management strategy involves placing them where they can't engulf other plants and where they'll be easy to prune. They can easily grow 15 feet or more.

- Full sun gives best bloom. They grow readily in shade but bloom more lightly.
- No special watering or fertilizer requirements. Jasmines can be reasonably drought tolerant.
- Grow as a houseplant?

Not really. One mail-order company has sold it as Winter jasmine for many years planted in a hanging basket, intended to send as a gift for the holidays. The plant initiates flower buds in a greenhouse and those buds will open for you to enjoy the flowers mid-winter. But this is a big, vigorous plant that will outgrow that hanging basket in spring. They're best in the ground.



There are many plants called jasmine that are unrelated, but which also have very fragrant flowers. Best-known is Star jasmine (*Trachelospermum jasminoides*). This is common in parking lots where it is often grown as a ground cover, but it is actually a vine and can readily cover your fence. Some people find the fragrance overpowering. A little goes a long

way. Star jasmine is very drought tolerant. Chilean jasmine is *Mandevilla laxa*, a deciduous vine (all the others are evergreen) with sweet-scented flowers in summer.

Honeysuckle

“Walk through a garden – especially at dusk – and you’ll smell honeysuckle way before you see it,” says The Perfume Society, informing us that the fragrance of honeysuckle is “heady and nectarous, a little like jasmine tinged with vanilla.” Especially at dusk that is presumably when their specialized pollinators are most active.

Oh my, be careful where you plant some types of honeysuckle! It’s a large group of plants in the genus *Lonicera*, with vines and shrubs including some native species.

By far the most widely planted, unfortunately, is *Lonicera japonica* ‘Halliana’, Hall’s Japanese honeysuckle. It is a very, very vigorous evergreen vine and is truly invasive in many parts of the US, especially the Southeastern and mid-Atlantic states.



Fortunately, we have much tamer honeysuckles for our gardens.

- The hybrid *Lonicera x heckrottii* called Gold Flame is very well-mannered, growing to about ten feet, enough for a section of fence or a small arbor.
- Dropmore Scarlet is another hybrid (*Lonicera x brownie*), this one with red tubular flowers and somewhat more vigorous but not a garden thug.

Both have fragrant flowers off and on through the summer, very attractive to hummingbirds and butterflies. They are deciduous. The fruit is very attractive to songbirds, and somewhat toxic to people and pets.

- Pink honeysuckle (*Lonicera hispidula*) is native to the Sierra foothills, the coast, and the coast range, usually in wetter areas but it is easy to grow and can tolerate drought. Also popular with hummingbirds, but only lightly fragrant.

Care of honeysuckles

- Sun: honeysuckle vines, as well as the shrubby species, can grow in shade and will bloom, but the plants are more compact and have more flowers in sun.
- No special watering or feeding requirements.
- Protection needed? No. They often get black aphids in summer. Watch the populations carefully and you’ll notice they are controlled readily by natural predators, especially tiny wasps that parasitize them. If you can tolerate the presence of some aphids on the vines, you’ll increase the resident population of beneficial insects in your garden, as well as birds. All are winter hardy here.
- Grow in containers? Not easily. These are big vines. They’ll be much easier to manage planted in the ground.

Lilies

Arguably the most popular cultivated flowers in the world, certainly if the use of the common name ‘lily’ is any indication. Lots of things are called lilies that aren’t (daylily, Peruvian lily, etc.).

True lilies are *Lilium*. There are species all over Asia, Europe, and North America, including some species native here in California. The key for gardeners: they are nearly always growing in sunny parts of wooded areas with high organic content in the soils and plenty of water.

Most are quite scented, though some grown for the florist industry are barely fragrant. Lilies have several fragrance types. For example, trumpet lilies smell somewhat musky, others are “fruity-honey.” Fragrance is strongest in the evening as they attract hawkmoths.

I have been bound and determined to figure out how to grow lilies to sustain the plants for more than just a year or two. Here’s the formula.

- Use the biggest container you can buy.
- Put it in full sun where it will get watered regularly.
- Fill it with rich, high-quality potting soil.
- Plant as many lily bulbs as will fit with about 6 inch spacing.
- Make sure the plants will have room to grow up and out about six feet.
- After the bloom, let the plants grow out as fully as possible until they die down on their own.
- Top-dress the container with two to four inches more of the same soil each spring.

My experience is that if you follow this recipe, your lily bulbs will bloom and increase for several years. Important to note that true lilies are quite toxic to cats.

