

Plants for Scented Desert Gardens

Most of us plan our gardens with sight as the primary sense in consideration. We plant waves of bright flowering shrubs, punctuate the scenery with agaves and ocotillos, and contrast green and gray foliage for variety. This makes for an interesting garden, no doubt, but a garden full of color, texture, and form is still incomplete without plants that add the sensual element of smell.

Smell is our way of tasting the air, something we otherwise move through with little notice. The scents of plants like Cleveland sage, Arabian jasmine, and Sweet olive are so heady and delicious that they make the air come alive and make us thankful for every breath. These species do their magic well beyond their physical spaces too, perfuming the air that wafts through windows and doors and adding delight to a garden at night when sight is a poor sense for enjoying the outdoors.

There is a large range of scented plants for desert gardens. They include accent plants and trees, ground covers and shrubs. In fact, a landscape could be designed using only scented plants. Some of the plants have fragrant flowers and some have fragrant foliage which releases its scent when wetted or rubbed. They need to be planted where their scents are accessible. Strongly scented flowers and “wetable” plants like creosote can be planted anywhere because their scents carry. Mildly scented flowers and plants that need to be rubbed should be close to living or “traffic” areas. Night bloomers should be in areas that are easy to reach in the dark.

Some scented plants also have medicinal and culinary uses. Creosote, for example, has strong antibacterial properties and anyone who hasn't tasted tea made from Mexican anise (*Tagetes lucida*) is missing an aromatic and delicious licorice flavored treat. A bonus of plants with strong smelling foliage is that they are usually unpalatable to rabbits.

The list below is not comprehensive, but covers common scented plants and some rare ones that are worth looking for. A few moderate water use plants are listed because they tolerate shady situations that most desert plants dislike—they include Sweet olive and Arabian jasmine.

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Trees

Acacia constricta "Whitethorn acacia"

Whitethorn is a thorny native plant that grows as a shrub or small tree up to 20 feet tall. Fragrant yellow puffball flowers bloom in late spring or early summer. This acacia is very drought tolerant and is great for natural gardens but is deciduous and bare for several months.

Acacia greggii "Catclaw acacia"

Catclaw is another very tough, very thorny tree or shrub that is native to the Tucson area. It has pleasant smelling flowers in spring. It is an ideal tree for un-irrigated landscapes.

Chilopsis linearis "Desert willow"

Some selections of this tree have scented flowers that bloom through the entire warm season. It is a native riparian tree that grows best with extra water during hot months.

Ebenopsis ebano (*Pithecellobium flexicaule*) "Texas ebony"

Texas ebony is one of our best landscape specimen trees. It has deep green foliage, zigzag branches and fragrant white puffy flowers. It is rather slow growing and quite thorny.

Eysenhardtia orthocarpa "Kidneywood"

This native tree has nice smelling flowers and foliage. It is little used in landscapes but is a great butterfly attracting plant. It is very bare in winter and should be mixed with evergreen plants.

Havardia pallens "Tenaza"

Tenaza is an attractive small tree with puffy flowers in early summer. Its fragrant flowers draw lots of insect pollinators. This tree deserves greater use in Tucson landscapes.

Sophora secundiflora "Texas mountain laurel"

This is a well known tree or shrub with wisteria-like flowers that smell of grape gum. It is an evergreen plant that grows very slowly but flowers from a small size.

Shrubs

Agastache cana "Bubblegum plant"

The evergreen foliage and pink flowers of this plant have a smell that is obvious from the name. It prefers filtered sun or part shade and supplemental water. It blooms summer to fall.

Aloysia gratissima (*lycioides*) "Bee brush"

A light vanilla scent emanates from the small white flowers of this shrub. It is great for attracting native bees and is a useful screen or background plant. It is semi-evergreen.

Aloysia wrightii "Wright's bee bush"

This Arizona native shrub has aromatic leaves and white flowers in the summer. It is deciduous.

Artemisia ludoviciana "Western mugwort"

The soft gray foliage of this plant provides a nice contrast in a garden of cacti and succulents. The leaves have a strong smell. It spreads by runners and grows to 3 feet tall.

Berlandiera lyrata "Chocolate flower"

They're no match for a See's Candy Store, but the flowers of this small shrub do smell like chocolate. It blooms in summer and benefits from deadheading to keep it blooming.

Chrysactinia mexicana "Damianita"

Damianita is an evergreen small shrub that looks great in mass plantings where its clusters of yellow flowers make a great showing. The foliage has a pleasant smell and it is good to plant this where it will be brushed up against. It is probably not very palatable to rabbits.

Crossosoma bigelovii “Rhyolite bush”

This plant is rare in the nursery trade but is worth looking for. It has twiggy stems, pale green leaves, and fragrant white flowers in winter.

Datura wrightii “Sacred datura”, “Jimson weed”

All parts of this plant are poisonous and hallucinogenic. It has very large and fragrant white flowers that bloom on summer nights. They are pollinated by large hawk moths. Not a plant for landscapes that contain teenage boys.

Dyssodia acerosa and Dyssodia pentachaeta “Dyssodia”

These small shrublets reseed easily and form sweeps of yellow flowers in a landscape. They are easy to grow and the seed eating birds love them. The foliage has a pleasant smell.

Encelia frutescens “Green brittlebush”

This rather weedy plant is good for informal gardens. Unlike the other brittlebushes, its flowers have no petals and a very nice smell. Its dark green leaves feel like sandpaper and it spreads readily by seed.

Ericameria laricifolia “Turpentine bush”

Turpentine bush looks too green to be a Tucson native, but it is. Its fragrant, fine textured, evergreen foliage provides nice contrast to a mostly gray-green palette of plants. It is very tough and gets covered with yellow flowers in the fall.

Glandularia gooddingii (Verbena gooddingii) “Goodding verbena”

Fragrant purple flowers grace this plant in spring and sometimes in summer. It is a local plant that spreads easily by seed and looks great with yellow flowered shrubs.

Hyptis emoryi “Desert lavender”

Rubbing the soft, fuzzy leaves of this plant releases a lavender scent that is very pleasant. It is a bit twiggy but should still be planted close to walkways where it can be appreciated.

***Jasminum sambac “Arabian jasmine”**

The smell of this jasmine is right up there with orange blossoms and plumeria in terms of intoxicating delight. It is a good container plant with deep green leaves and a rather loose habit. It needs more water than local desert species and is best in part shade. The flowers are used to flavor jasmine tea.

Larrea tridentata “Creosote”

The leaves of creosote are covered with a shellac-like substance that creates the smell of rain in the southwest. This is one tough plant with many landscape uses and it grows quickly with a little extra water. Every yard in Tucson should have one.

Lavandula species “Lavender”

There are several lavender species available for planting here. They all have pleasant smelling foliage and flowers and do well in containers. They require well drained soil or they get root rot in the humid part of summer.

Leucophyllum laevigatum “Chihuahuan sage”

Chihuahuan sage has scented violet blue flowers in summer. It is a low care evergreen shrub.

Leucophyllum pruinatum “Fragrant rain sage”

This sage, also known as a “Texas ranger”, bears strongly scented purple flowers and silvery foliage. It flowers in summer.

***Osmanthus fragrans “Sweet olive”**

Okay, this isn't a desert plant, but it does well in shade here and the apricot scented flowers are wonderful. This is a good plant for those shady places where local plants fail anyway.

Parthenium incanum “Mariola”

Mariola is common in this area but uncommon in the nurseries. It has soft scented foliage and tolerates terrible soils and full sun.

Penstemon palmeri “Palmer penstemon”

Penstemons look great here in spring but look ratty the rest of the year. They are worth it, though. This species has waxy gray-green leaves and 3 foot spikes of pink flowers that are scented—not a common trait for this genus.

Poliomintha maderensis “Mexican oregano”

Several plants have this common name, but this one is edible and tastes like oregano. It has small shiny leaves and purple flowers in summer and fall. It prefers light shade.

Psoralea arguta "Smoke bush"

This small tree or large shrub has fragrant foliage, if that's what you call it. It is mostly sharp twigs and no leaves. It is an interesting background plant and is very drought tolerant. It grows more quickly with occasional deep watering.

Salvia clevelandii "Cleveland sage"

The blue spikes of flowers on this plant are amazing to see and the smell of the foliage is almost as dramatic. Its leaves can be used in cooking or for tea (tea that tastes good???)

Tagetes lemmonii "Mt. Lemmon marigold"

This aromatic shrub puts on a show of yellow flowers in the fall. Some people find the smell of the foliage overwhelming and some have an allergic reaction to it that resembles poison ivy. The seeds make it a good bird garden plant.

Tagetes lucida "Mexican anise"

The whole of this plant has a pleasant licorice smell and it makes an outstanding tea that tastes of licorice and vanilla. It freezes back in winter and doesn't do much growing until the monsoon. It's worth the wait.

Telosiphonia brachysiphon "Rock trumpet"

Rock trumpet is a local plant that is still rare in cultivation. It is a small shrub that grows in full or filtered sun and should be planted where its white flowers can be appreciated up close. They smell like Gardenia. It is sometimes available at the Az-Sonora Desert Museum.

***Teucrium fruticans** "Bush germander"

This is a large germander with gray leaves and blue flowers. It can grow to 8 feet across, so it needs room in the garden. Compact varieties are available.

***Vallesia baileyana** "Vallesia"

Vallesia is uncommon but shows up at nurseries on occasion. It is an evergreen shrub from Mexico that has nice smelling white flowers in the spring.

Vines

***Lonicera japonica v. halliana** "Japanese honeysuckle"

Honeysuckle has pleasant smelling white flowers and grows quickly up trellises or other structures. It is generally evergreen and needs moderate water for best growth.

***Trachelospermum jasminoides** "Star jasmine"

The flowers of this vine are very strongly scented and can be cloying at close range. It is beautiful in bloom, however, and is evergreen and fast growing.

Accent Plants

Agave schottii "Shindagger"

Shindagger is a small clumping agave that has nutmeg scented blooms. It grows well in containers and looks good in native plantings.

Bursera microphylla "Elephant tree"

This succulent tree is great for container planting where frost is not a problem. The foliage smells of incense.

***Pachypodium saundersii**

The flowers of this African succulent are fragrant at night in the late summer and early fall. It is an easy to grow plant for containers that develops an attractive swollen base and branches with large green leaves and spines. It is not tolerant of Tucson winters and needs some protection during our coldest nights.

Peniocereus greggii "Queen of the night"

This homely twig-like cactus has large white flowers in the summer. The flowers can be smelled from a long way off. It is best grown into a creosote or other desert bush as it does in nature.

* species not native to the SW US or northern Mexico