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## From My Garden by H.E. Bates



### The Scents of Summer

This month our favourite novelist writes evocatively about one of the most delightful and most mysterious aspects of gardening

The vast and complex subject of scent in flowers has long fascinated me. Here, I have always felt, is an everlasting mystery: not merely the fact of scent and its infinite variations, not merely the fact that some flowers give off fragrance by day but others only at night or that some flowers have no scent at all, or that from time to time a certain plant—the old-fashioned musk much loved by our Victorian and Edwardian ancestors, for example, or *Clematis montana*—all of a sudden, for no explicable reason, loses its scent and never gets it back again. It is always being said that the modern rose generally lacks the fragrance of its nineteenth-century ancestor, particularly the luscious hybrid perpetuals, into which you could bury your face and fancy you were drinking the perfume, like wine. If the charge that all modern roses are scentless cannot really be wholly upheld it is at least partly true and it would be interesting to know why.

But there are really three great things about the scent of flowers that fascinate and indeed puzzle me: the extraordinary effect on the senses of an inanimate something which cannot be seen, has no shape and cannot be touched or heard; its tremendous power of evocation and association; and perhaps most remarkable of all its power to

get itself recorded, visually, by the mind, which in turn will preserve the image, together with some minute, even trivial, association for an entire lifetime.

Thus if I stand in my garden in Kent and hold a bunch of spring violets to my nostrils it isn't the immediate experience of inhaling the incomparable violet richness that gives me pleasure. The scent, in a split second, also unlocks a door, so that I am suddenly a small boy again, sitting in my grandfather's lamplit kitchen, helping to bunch violets that will be sold from his little pony-drawn market-gardener's cart on Saturday morning. I have only to put a cowslip to my nose and in a flash I am back in a midland valley, in May, gathering cowslips with my grandmother, 60 years ago. Give me a sprig of honeysuckle and such is the evocative power of its perfume that I am instantly in a sort of sensual swoon, reliving a score of summers and all their vivid, visual associations, half a century ago.

Charles Laughton, the actor, with whom I had dinner just before he died, had a theory that the greatest of all computers was the human brain, besides which the most advanced mechanical version, for all its brilliance, was a comparative bungler. Laughton's theory is nowhere better supported than by the miracle of scent and the further miracle of the mind's ability to photograph infinite variations of it, file them away for decades and then suddenly produce, in a flash of re-experience, the correct print more swiftly than any instant camera.

Some time ago a research was instituted among artists, musicians and writers in an attempt to discover just what influence scent, not only of flowers, fruit and manufactured perfumes but of earth, of rain on summer dust, of seaweed, new-mown hay, leather cloth, a girl's hair, a sea-salt wind and countless other sources, had on them. The results are too varied and complex to go into here but over and over again these highly sensitised people confessed to the great stimulant power that various scents, and some of them very unlikely ones, had on them mentally, sensuously and creatively. Some even went so far as to admit that without the stimulus of some scent of a powerful association—lily of the valley was one, lime flowers another, clove carnations another—their creative juices would not even begin to flow. On me, the scent of honeysuckle has much the same effect. One swift draught of that essence of summer sets all my creative senses dancing.

If the power of scent is so great on those of us still blessed with the gift of sight, how much more magnified it must be on those unfortunate enough no longer to possess it. Laughton's theory of the marvels of the human computer may have to be extended to include another, namely that scent is itself a sort of second sight. Thus all scent, to the blind, must be infinitely precious. The element that cannot be touched, seen or heard has its own tremendous power of visual creation.

A foot treading on a bed of thyme, a salvia leaf rolled between thumb and forefinger, young grass bruised by summer feet, a pot of rose petals, the strong odour of dying oak leaves in autumn woods as your feet brush through them—it would be sad indeed if we who still have sight took these, seemingly trivial though they are, for granted. I will certainly see that I don't in future. In fact I will go about my garden looking for scent and where I don't find it I will plant some. Then perhaps, in the next century, one of my grandchildren, chancing on that most heavily perfumed of all pinks, *Dianthus Loveliness* (try it, it is a wholly exquisite thing) will take the swiftest breath of it and be most miraculously transported back to another world. □□

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