

The Gardening Guru's Scented Geranium Fact Sheet

SCENTED GERANIUMS

We as gardeners generally look at annual plants for their “How many and how colorful are the flowers you can produce for me in one year?”. Since annuals have to complete their life cycle in one year and have to attract as many pollinators as possible to create as many seeds as possible (breathe), annuals fill the bill for color and sheer amounts of flowers to “colorize” our beds and borders. Unfortunately we overlook plants that can be as pleasing to the eyes (in ways other than color) and more importantly, pleasing to the nose. I was taught many years ago by a fellow horticulturist that the nose is just as important as the eyes in gardening. Think about what happens to you as you walk into a spring garden that has lilacs in bloom. First you notice the colors of the lilacs, but as you get closer, it is the sweet smell of the lilacs that stays in your memory for years to come. There is a psychological barrier for us between the seasons of gardening and scents. In the spring, after being cooped up in the stale house during the winter months, our noses run wild for any scent that we can find in our gardens. But as the year progresses, we change from the sweet smells to the visual colors and leave behind our noses for scents such as a newly cut lawn or the smell of steaks cooking on the grill (sorry vegetarians!).

Hopefully with this “Manual” I will get you to think a little more about your noses as well as your eyes. First off, there are many different varieties of scents available to you with Pelargoniums. There are mints, rose, fruits, nuts and more, and all you need to do is to brush up against the plants for these scents. The blooms of Pelargoniums are small and do not over shadow the beauty of the different leaf shapes, unlike those of the normal geraniums. They are easy to care for in the garden or container and best of all, you can propagate new cuttings in the late summer for inside your home during the scentless winter months. These are plants all gardeners should have growing in their gardens, but few do.

THE GERANIUM vs. PELARGONIUM QUESTION

Lets’ begin by clarifying the Latin name confusion. As most of you know, there is a native geranium that belongs to the Genus Geranium. Scented geraniums belong to the Genus Pelargonium. Both plants belong to the Family Geraniaceae, or the geranium family. There are some 250 naturally occurring species of Pelargonium, most of which are native to South Africa,

where they are perennial and grow into shrubs more than seven feet high. Many have highly scented leaves, which is thought to deter grazing animals. Out of the 250, only a few are used in the garden. Hybridization over the past 10 to 15 years has led to countless cultivars being offered by nurseries and garden centers. Most of the new scentededs have gotten so specific that my nose cannot tell the difference between two cultivars, so be a smart shopper when purchasing. Some scentededs have easily recognizable scents, such as lemon or peppermint, whereas a cinnamon smell to one person may be a citrus to another. The scents of scented geraniums is contained in the small beads of oil produced in glands at the base of tiny leaf hairs. Bruising or crushing the leaves breaks the beads and releases the scents. The leaves of scentededs vary not only in the fragrance, but also in their shapes, sizes, colors and textures. They can range in length from 1/2 inch to 6 inches. Some are circular in shape while others are lobed to varying degrees and others are as finely divided as a fern.

SCENTEDS IN THE LANDSCAPE

I have never met a true gardener that can say that their garden is finished or complete. A garden is an ever-changing palate, constantly changing with the seasons or with the likes and dislikes of the owner. In the Northeast, scented geraniums are grown as annuals, making a good substitute for foliage annuals such as Dusty Miller and regular geraniums. Some varieties can thrive in a poor, dry soil where other plants would not succeed. Scenteds, as well as most annuals, do best when massed in the garden. Low growing types such as "Nutmeg" make excellent edging or border plants for pathways and walks. When planted in these areas, it is hard to avoid brushing against them and releasing their scents, a way to make a visitor's entrance more memorable. Larger, more shrubbier cultivars such as "Old Fashioned Rose" can add height to your garden as well as plenty of materials for a potpourri, which we will discuss later. As with all plantings, intermingle perennials, annuals, shrub and trees together for a nice combination of flower color and leaf texture. When people purchase perennials for their gardens, they seem to overlook how the foliage looks for the other 30 weeks of the growing season and how it can add a new dimension to your garden. Keep in mind the importance of foliage size, shape and texture as its own design component as well as stabilizing the background of the garden for the colors to stand out against. As effective when grown in the garden, I personally like the way a scented can fill a container. It almost seems as though scentededs and containers were made for each other. The best part about planting in containers is that they are

portable and can be moved from one spot to another to add color to a dull area that may not be in bloom or is in a waiting period after the bulbs have finished flowering. If you have a rectangular container, pelargoniums can act as a barrier or hedge to confine or limit a space, or to show definition to an area. On your patio, pelargoniums can add fragrance to a boring seating area. Larger containers of scentededs can be used to hide hoses, electrical boxes and other eyesores. Many of the smaller leaved varieties are suitable for hanging baskets or window boxes, such as "Apple", "Coconut", "Old Spice" and "Nutmeg".

HOW TO GROW AND CARE FOR PELARGONIUMS

Scenteds grow best in a soil slightly on the acidic side, with a pH of 6.0 to 6.5. A simple soil test should be done every two years, and the Agricultural Extension Agency in your area does do soil testing, or you can purchase a kit at your local garden center. Remember you get what you pay for, so don't always go cheaper!

With fertilizing, I prefer a fish emulsion/seaweed extract, which is a slow-release fertilizer that also has a good supply of micronutrients. A feeding once a month will be sufficient for the scentededs, but the plants will tell you more accurately than I can, so pay attention to what they say! If you plant scentededs in a container, I would suggest a fertilizer called Osmocote, which will give you a balanced, prolonged feeding for up to 9 months, so all you have to do is water. They prefer as much sunlight as possible, but afternoon direct sunlight in the summer can quickly kill or burn the foliage of the plant, especially if the container is not well watered or you are in a drought. They grow best in temperatures of 50 to 60 degrees at night and 65 to 75 degrees during the day. Excessive heat can wilt them, so make sure you keep up on the watering!

PRUNING SCENTEDS

Scenteds that are not pruned will eventually be leggy and overgrown and begin to look unattractive. To prune, begin by removing the main leader by pinching the bud that is located at the top of the main stem (the terminal bud). This can be done when the plant has at least five leaves or is 4 to 6 inches tall. The nodes (plant buds) which are located at the base of the leaf stems on the main stem will begin to grow a new side shoot. When these new stems have five leaves per stem, again pinch the terminal bud out of them. This process will produce an extremely full and attractive plant in

your garden or container. The entire process from cutting to full plant takes about 8 to 12 weeks, so be patient. For disease prevention, pinch off any leaves that may be touching the ground. From this point on you can prune your plant to keep a desired shape or size, or to collect cuttings that can be started for friends and family.

PROPAGATING

Remove a 3 to 4 inch cutting from an established plant by using a sharp pruner or scissor. There are two different ways that you can go from here. One way is to leave the cutting on a table overnight, no water or anything. This will cause the cut to callus and it is from this new callus that the roots will form. The second way is to use a mild rooting hormone and dip the cutting into it, tapping off the excess. A strong concentration of rooting hormone will kill the cutting, so be gentle. You can use a sandy mix as a rooting "soil". Place the cutting in this mix, keeping the soil moist but not soaking wet. Within three to four weeks the cutting should have some starter roots. The easiest way to tell is to see if the top has new growth. Plants will only grow if they have the roots to supply the nutrients.

The scented geraniums are an excellent exterior as well as interior plant that is relatively maintenance free and always will to please.

SCENTED PELARGONIUMS - VARIETIES TO GROW

Although there are thousands of scented pelargoniums available on the market, I am only listing the varieties that I feel are the best.

ROSE-SCENTED VARIETIES

These are probably the most popular of the scented. Rose-scented are grown commercially in Africa and France for their oil, which is used in the perfume and cosmetic industries.

"Atomic Snowflake" - This sport of "Snowflake" has a gold variegation and a slightly distorted leaf edge. The lavender flowers and lemon-rose scent are identical to those of "Snowflake". It can have the tendency to revert to "Round-Leaf Rose", but less readily than "Snowflake".

"Attar of Roses" - This fairly large plant with three-lobed leaves and a nice strong rose scent is a good choice for sachets and potpourri. The small flowers are lavender.

"Both's Snowflake" ("Ice Crystal Rose") - Leaves are gray-green and deeply divided, with irregular splashes of cream and white. Strong lemon-rose scent and small, lavender flowers. One of the larger plants for a ½ whiskey barrel.

"Candy Dancer" - The lemon-rose scented leaves are deeply divided and fern-like. Its single lavender flower and habit is similar to that of "Dr. Livingston" but is more dense and compact.

Pelargonium capitatum - Plants of this species vary in strength of rose fragrance; check the scent before purchasing. It is sprawling, poorly suited for pots even with good pruning habit.

"Charity" - A sport of the old-fashioned-rose type that has large green incised leaves with a wide, gold edging. This robust plant is great for the garden or large containers. It has small lavender flowers.

"Crowfoot Rose" - The deeply cut leaves have a velvety texture and a scent between rose and lemon-rose. The small lavender flowers are borne in such profusion that they can exhaust the plant; it may be helpful to debud a few if the plant begins to look unhealthy.

"Dr. Livingston" ("Skeleton Leaf Rose") - This tall, rangy plant has deeply cut leaves with a rough, raspy texture and a rose scent. A good selection for a background plant in your garden.

"Lady Plymouth" - Another sport of the old fashioned rose, it has deeply divided gray-green leaves that are edged and sometimes splotted with white. This variable plant will sport two other named cultivars: "Grey Lady Plymouth", which has a finer white leaf edging, and "Silver Leaf Rose", which has a silvery cast to the leaf and even finer white edging. All three have a nice rose scent and small lavender flowers, and can revert to the solid green form, so pinch any green shoots that appear.

"Old Fashioned Rose" - This plant, of medium height, has gray-green strongly indented leaves, a nice rose scent and lavender flowers. The most important scented pelargonium for the commercial production of rose-geranium oil, it is also used in jams, jellies, and potpourri. It makes an attractive potted plant as well.

"Rober's Lemon Rose" - This is sometimes called the tomato geranium, because its leaves are irregularly incised and resemble those of a tomato plant. It is a vigorous grower with a strong lemon-rose scent.

“Round-Leaf Rose” - The large, soft, fuzzy leaves of this cultivar have shallow lobes and a good lemon-rose scent. It is a large, trailing plant with single lavender flowers.

“Snowflake” - This sport of “Round-Leaf Rose” has a hit-or-miss variegation. It is a good cultivar for large hanging baskets. It also has the tendency to revert to “Round-Leaf Rose”, so all green branches should be pinched.

“Variegated Giant Rose” - It has gold variegation in a large hit or miss pattern, with the same leaf shape and texture, and lemon-rose scent as “Round-Leaf Rose”.

“Variegated Attar of Rose” - This recent sport of “Attar of Rose” is the same in scent and flower. The leaf variegation is creamy gold in a hit or miss pattern.

MINT-SCENTED VARIETIES

Though there are but a few truly mint-scented pelargoniums, their fragrance is often strong and unmistakable.

“Apple Mint” - This cultivar looks like “Apple”, but its scent is both fruity and minty. The soft gray-green leaves are larger than those of the typical apple. It has tiny white flowers borne on long sprays and makes a great hanging basket plant.

“Joy Lucille” - This tall, rangy cultivar is thought to be a cross between *P. graveolens* (“Old Fashioned Rose”) and *P. tomentosum* (“Peppermint”). The leaves are more deeply lobed than “Peppermint” and have only a light mint scent. The single flowers are pale pink lilac. A sport, “Variegated Joy Lucille” has hit or miss white variegation.

“Mint-Scented Rose” - This cultivar is similar to “lady Plymouth” and has deeply divided gray-green leaves with a cream to white hit or miss variegation. Its scent is moderately minty.

“Peppermint” (*P. tomentosum*) - This large, sprawling plant has large, lobed leaves with a wonderful soft, velvety texture and sprays of small white flowers. It can quickly fill a tub or planter. It is the most strongly scented of all mint-scented varieties. This plant can use more afternoon shade than most scented.

“Peppermint Lace” - The leaves of this cultivar are very large, flat and deeply cut, giving them a lacy look. The scent is strongly mint. The plant is tall and robust and has small, single white flowers.

“Rollison’s Unique” - This robust plant has large curly leaves, a mild mint scent, and single bright magenta flowers.

LEMON/CITRUS SCENTED VARIETIES

This group includes a wide variety of plants, from tiny leaves to treelike, large-leaves. Many cultivars have a clean, sharp scent and are great in cooking and potpourri. Some have been in cultivation for more than two centuries and are still the most popular scented available.

“Citronella” - This is a large plant with coarse, lobed-leaves, a moderate lemon scent, and small lavender flowers. Don’t confuse this with *P. citronellum*.

“Mabel Grey” (*P. citronellum*) - Originally introduced as the cultivar “Mabel Grey”, this plant was later determined to be a species and renamed. It has large, sharply lobed rough leaves with a very strong lemon scent. It grows upright and tall, often reaching 5-7 feet.

“Frensham” (Frenchaise) - The first reported hybrid of *P. citronellum*, this plant was introduced in England in 1970. The leaves have less sharply lobed than *P. citronellum*, and the plant is shorter, and the flowers and scent are the same.

“Lemonaire”, “Lemon Fancy”, and “Lemon Meringue” - These all appear to be *P. citronellum* hybrids and are almost identical to “Frensham”. They all have stiff, sharply toothed leaves, a sharp lemon scent, and single, pale lavender flowers.

“Galway Star” - This plant resembles “Variegated Prince Rupert” in leaf and stem but is larger and is blessed with a sharp lemon scent. It has single pale lilac flowers.

“Ginger” (“Toronto”) - This tall, robust plant is similar in appearance to “Lime”, but its smooth, round, slightly toothed leaves are larger. The fairly large flowers are lavender with deep purple markings. Freshly cut ginger scent.

“Golden Lemon Crispum” - A sport of *P. crispum*, this cultivar has green leaves edged with chartreuse and a nice lemon scent.

“Hansen’s Wild Spice” - This plant has smooth, slightly toothed leaves and large flowers with rosy pink upper petals and paler pink lower ones. It has a sweet citrus fragrance. If left unpruned, the branches will trail making it a good candidate for hanging baskets. “Lady Mary” - The small toothed leaves have a faint lemon scent with a rose overtone, and the pure pink flowers are splotched with a reddish rose. Sometimes erroneously sold as “Strawberry”, this cultivar is gracefully grown in a hanging basket.

“Lemon” (*P. crispum*) - This is the most popular of the lemon scented pelargoniums. It has small, roundish, crinkled leaves. It has stiff stems which, if left unpruned, cascade as they lengthen, making it a good candidate for a hanging basket.

“Lemon Balm” - This large, very tall plant has coarse, lobed leaves and a pungent lemon scent. It has small, single lavender flowers.

“Lime” - The roundish leaves are smooth, slightly ruffled, and sweet lime scented. The flowers, larger than most, are pale lavender with deep purple spots on the upper petals. The plant will grow tall and lanky if not pruned frequently.

“Limoneum” - Another cultivar with small, saw-toothed leaves that have a sweet lemon-lime scent, with flowers that are a deep rose-purple. The plant is sometime erroneously sold as “Cinnamon”.

“Orange” - This plant has large, saw-toothed leaves with a sweet orange scent and is a medium upright grower. The large single flowers are very pale lilac with deep purple splotches on the upper petals.

“Prince of Orange” - This plant has been cultivated in England since the 1800’s. It has small-serrated leaves with a mild mandarin orange scent. This plant is rarely seen or offered for sale in the United States and is smaller than “Orange”.

“Prince Rupert” - This plant is similar to *P. crispum*, but the leaves are slightly lobed, and the scent is neither as strong nor as sweet.

“Roger’s Delight” - The real pelargonium is a large, floppy plant with a nice lemon scent. The large flowers have reddish purple upper petals and pale lavender-rose lower petals. It is suitable for hanging baskets.

“Upright Coconut” (P. elongatum) - This plant has a round, serrated leaf with a distinct dark brown zone and mild citrus scent despite its name. It is a floppy plant suited for hanging baskets, with small flowers of pale, creamy yellow.

FRUIT AND NUT SCENTED VARIETIES

Though most of the members of this group are sweetly scented, their names in many cases do not accurately describe their fragrance. Don’t be surprised if you cannot detect the scent that the name suggests.

“Almond” - The deeply lobed leaves of this cultivar develop a slightly brownish center when grown in strong sunlight. The flowers are bright pink with rosy red spots on the upper petals.

“Apple” (P. odoratissimum) - This species has soft, gray-green leaves and a refreshing apple-cider scent. It grows in a low clump, and its tiny white flowers are produced on long trailing sprays. It looks great in a hanging basket.

“Coconut” (P. grossularioides) - The leaves of this species are small, round and deep green. It forms a low-growing mound of foliage with long sprays of very small magenta flowers. It has a pleasant scent, though not necessarily that of coconut, and it self-seeds freely.

“Concolor Lace” (“Filbert”, “Shottesham Pet”) - The light green, deeply divided leaves of this cultivar somewhat resembles carrot leaves and are supposed to smell like filbert leaves. A pretty plant, with small, bright red flowers, that is handsome in pots.

“Fringed Apple” - Similar to “Apple”, of which it was a seedling, the leaves have a fringed, serrated edge, and the scent is a bit more pungent.

“Patron’s Unique” (“Apricot”) - This cultivar is best known in the United States as “Apricot”, though its correct name dates back to its introduction in England in 1870. It has deeply lobed, dark green leaves with a pungent scent. They have large flowers with pink and rose petals punctuated by a small white “eye”.

“Peach” (“Gooseberry-Leaf”) - The roundish leaves are small, have crisped edges, and are variegated with cream or white in a hit or miss pattern. The scent is fairly citrus, and the single flowers are pale lilac.

“Strawberry” (“Countess of Scarborough”) - This cultivar has small, dark green tri-lobed leaves with a crinkled edge and the sweet fragrance of strawberry and citrus. The flowers are pale pink with darker margins on the upper petals. It makes a nice hanging basket.

PUNGENT-SCENTED VARIETIES

These are scented pelargoniums that don't quite fit into the other categories. In some the fragrance is strong, while others is faint. Also varieties in this group are sometimes grown for their flowers. A “catch-all” group.

“Aroma” - The small round gray-green leaves of this cultivar are curly and smell like those of “Nutmeg”, but are less pungent. It is a low, dense clumping plant with tiny white flowers, making a good choice for hanging baskets.

“Brilliant” - This cultivar has lobed leaves with a medium pungent scent. The single flowers are cerise purple.

“Brunswick” - The large leaves of the large sprawling cultivar have a slightly pungent scent. It is one scented that is best grown for its showy deep, rose flowers with dark stippling.

“Chocolate Mint” - This hybrid of “Peppermint” and “Giant Oak” has leaves shaped like those of the oak, but they lack the peppermint scent. The chocolate refers to the attractive, brownish purple blotch in the center of each leaf, not to the scent.

“Clorinda” - This big, leggy plant has shallowly lobed leaves and a scent that has been described as eucalyptus or cedar. It is grown for its large, bright pink flowers.

“Copthorne” - This very tall, leggy plant has large, tri-lobed leaves and is considered to smell of cedar. Its pale lavender flowers are larger than most and bloom for a longer period of time.