

In the garden with Shobha Vanchiswar



Monday, May 23, 2011

The scent of a season

Before you do anything else, step outside. Walk into the garden. Now stand still and close your eyes. Breathe deeply a few times.

Become aware of the aromas in the air. First you notice the dominant note and slowly you become aware of the more subtle fragrances, so complex and clear all at once. That's the perfume of spring.

The season starts with hyacinths that make their presence known unabashedly. Soon pansies and violas, narcissi and all sorts of early bloomers join in this aromatic party. Each scent is unique and memorable. How utterly delicious it feels to breathe in all these sweet smells.

Right now, in the second half of May, are you paying attention to the three most divine scents? There's wisteria, lilac and lily-of-the-valley. All evoke feelings of nostalgia in me, of childhood, dear ones, sentimental places.

My personal scent scrapbook

That's the beauty of smell. Each one evokes a memory. Our olfactory system is a vast and ancient scrapbook. Lilacs remind of grandmother's kisses, strawberries speak of picnics. Heliotropes bring to mind homemade pound cakes regularly provided by an elderly neighbor and in his memory I resolve to bake one this weekend. An orchid whose name eludes offers tender recollections of my baby fresh from her bath. In the midst of winter, I associate the blooms of witch hazel to the astringent used by my sister when we were teenagers. Life's heartbreaks and highlights are archived in odors. The strong perfume of lilies represents loss to some and to others they are symbols of weddings and other blessings. Remember having Vicks Vaporub applied lovingly when you were home sick as a child? Guess what? There exists a Vicks plant that smells exactly like the unguent!

Too often these days we forget about the importance of fragrance as we create gardens. A showy perpetual rose is selected in place of one that is heavily perfumed but blooms only for a brief time each year. We sacrifice a deeper enjoyment of gardens when we reject moments of sensual living for days of

superficial existence. Magnolias are refused occupancy because they are “messy.” Lily-of-the-valley is bypassed because its leaves often turn brown in summer. Haven’t these plants, whose pleasures are priceless, earned a place in the garden? What’s a little effort to clean up fallen petals or tolerate a bit of aged leaves? I embrace them just as I expect the world to accept me with all my many flaws.

What’s contained in your olfactory scrapbook?

Night blooming jasmine takes me back to summer nights in my childhood garden when grownups were relaxed and fireflies twinkled back at the stars. Roses relate more than one beautiful story in my past. So I nurture them in my present garden. And then there’s lavender, brugamansia, viburnum, boxwood, rosemary, orange blossom, spicebush, peony, freesia, gardenia, . . .

Think about the happy memories that surface when you smell specific flowers. Make a list. Now which ones do you not have growing indoors or out? Why not? Make a resolution to change that situation. Surround yourself with all the plants that make you feel good as a fitting tribute to the people, places and events that have made you who you are. Then add some new fragrances to define the days that lie ahead.

A special treat for fern lovers!



FYI, Dr. John Mickel is one of the leading pteridologists (fern experts) in the world and one of the nicest, most unpretentious people I know.

Saturday, June 4, Carol and John Mickel’s garden will be open to the public from **10:00 a.m. – 3:00 p.m.** for the New York Fern Society. Their garden is located at 32 Farm Road, Briarcliff Manor, New York, 10510. For more info, email: jmickel@nybg.org .

Their farm is part of an old Macy estate with several interesting trees, and in June the gardens are always

fresh and well fern-ished. There are about 140 kinds of ferns in several lightly shaded habitats along with other perennials. There will be plants for sale – see fern list below.

Fern plants for sale

Northern maidenhair, *Adiantum pedatum*
Himalayan maidenhair, *Adiantum venustum*
Upside down fern, *Arachniodes standishii*
Eared lady fern, *Athyrium otophorum*
Ghost fern, *Athyrium 'Ghost'*;
Japanese unpainted fern, *Athyrium niponicum*
Japanese painted fern, *Athyrium niponicum 'Pictum'*;
Japanese holly fern, *Cyrtomium fortunei*
Bulblet bladder fern, *Cystopteris bulbifera*
Woodland fragile fern, *Cystopteris protrusa*
Hayscented fern, *Dennstaedtia punctilobula*
Lady in bed, *Deparia conilii*
Japanese glade fern, *Deparia okuboana*
Petersen's glade fern, *Deparia petersenii*
The King wood fern, *Dryopteris affinis 'Cristata The King'*;
Dixie wood fern, *Dryopteris australis*
Champion's wood fern, *Dryopteris championii*
Brilliant autumn fern, *Dryopteris erythrosora 'Brilliance'*;
Male fern, *Dryopteris filix-mas*
Golden mist wood fern, *Dryopteris labordei*
Japanese mountain fern, *Dryopteris monticola*
Mexican wood fern, *Dryopteris pseudofilix-mas*
Tokyo wood fern, *Dryopteris tokyoensis*
Ostrich fern, *Matteuccia struthiopteris*
Sensitive fern, *Onoclea sensibilis*
Tassel fern, *Polystichum polyblepharum*
Trifid holly fern, *Polystichum tripterum*
Beddome's maiden fern, *Thelypteris beddomei*
Japanese beech fern, *Thelypteris decursive-pinnata*
Northern beech fern, *Thelypteris phegopteris*