



Kathy's Garden: DISTILLATIONS OF HEAVEN

Like so much in this life, preference for and response to fragrance is a very individual matter. The fragrance that I adore may send you fleeing for fresher air; the scent you acclaim may leave me cold, or faintly green with nausea, not envy. Reveling in the musky, sweetly intimate fragrance of the Oriental lilies I massed in a vase in my cabin, I called to my partner to notice & appreciate. He glanced at them - this incredible pink & gold & white mass of gigantic stary bloom. "Nice," he said. "Smell them!" I said, handing him a particularly beautiful banded pink one. "Umm. Yes, they do certainly smell strange."

To me they smell like a distillation of heaven & all the poetry of John Keats. And, like many of my favorite scented flowers, they have a whiff of vanilla in their complexity.

I now & then envision a vanilla garden, but I suspect the inclusion or exclusion of various vanilla scented plants would be a matter of hot debate. My partner detects no vanilla in the fragrance of lilies, nor in the loveliness of the sweet smelling jonquils like the pretty paperwhites I pot up every year for indoor bloom. To him the paperwhites smell rather of cat, & in fact there is a chemical present in the jonquils that to many unhappy souls smells fetid, not beautiful.

The plant from which the vanilla we happily dollop in cream & cakes & puddings comes is in itself a beautiful thing, a great Mexican orchid. The cultivation of the vanilla orchid is to be attempted only by the happy possessors of a fine heated greenhouse & a wonderful skill with plants. Someday I may be in that category. Meanwhile, if you are not, you can still enjoy the tender fragrance of vanilla in a number of relatively easy plants.

Sweet woodruff gives off a gentle, nostalgic vanilla scent as it dies back. The fresh leaves, so prettily whorled, making a nice ground cover in partial shade, have very little fragrance. If you like, however, you can pick the leaves & press them in your books or hand little bunches to dry; as the leaves dry the fragrance intensifies. A bit of woodruff tucked in a letter sends its own sweetness far from your garden. The scent lasts a long time; I've come across woodruff pressed at least 10 years ago, still releasing that sweetness.

I find a vanilla scent in the leaves and stems of the rock roses. These are wonderful shrubs for sun or partial shade; they are drought tolerant & have crinkled flowers in white, orchid, & rose, some in clear colors & others with blotches - yellow on white, deep plum on pink. The fragrance, which comes from a resin in the leaves & stems, is particularly strong after a rain or again when the hot August sun heats up the garden. I save the pruning of rockrose for my potpourris. These plants are amongst the simplest to grow from cuttings made just before the autumn rains, so note your neighbors' plants & make your plants now; I just put my cuttings directly into the ground where I want new plants. They grow. Yours will too.

The pretty pink & white striped bindweed smells delicately of vanilla but only a fool would let it into the garden. It was one of my favorite vacant lot plants during my childhood; I keep hoping to come across a tame convolvulus with the fragrance of vanilla wafers. Surely somewhere there is one. Meanwhile a safe vanilla-scented vine is the autumn clematis paniculata (also listed as c. dioscoreifolia), which is covered with tiny white flowers like a mass of sweet smoke from late summer into the fall. You can have sweet peas too—they smell like vanilla to me, at least some of them do; you may have to look to British sources (like the Thompson & Morgan Company) for individual varieties bred for maximum fragrance, or try a mixed selection offered as "old fashioned sweet peas." You can plant sweet peas in the fall for very early spring bloom; they like lots of rich soil & cool weather.

Do tuberoses smell a bit like vanilla to you? They do to me, but perhaps I am just looking for an excuse to plant more. They are frost tender tubers; you can grow them in pots like tuberous begonias. Start them indoors in February or March & then move them outside when the frost danger is past. One bloom will scent the air for a long distance. I like the graceful single forms best but the double variety "The Pearl" is more often available.

If you chose only one or two of the vanilla scented plants to include somewhere in your garden you will be rewarded with sweet, comforting, enduring fragrance in your life. What more could anyone really desire?

~ Kathy Epling

Ghazals (at Tui's challenge) The Lettered Ghazals

Paper Flowers for Afghanistan

In Herat and Kabul there are still roses
though in the mountains the bread is earth
& grass. When I cry for you I remember this

& the blue domed houses of Mazur & Sheref
like a fairy tale painting
though that red border is blood

When I cry for you I remember the sandy graves
your fingers touching
your son's cold body & that rough burqa

sky colored. Snow closes the passes
Hunger shuts another child's eyes
My hands are empty

& it's a long way anyway
to those amber & pink gardens
summer like chambers of honey

Your girl cries for bread
in her thin dress covered with roses
the word threads & impossible buds

Kathy Epling

Dark nights. When you moved beyond the last
rings of stars & oceans, there were no letters

Even the fir trees lift their arms to dance
when the wind spins messages, these feathered letters.

Write to me, I said. I don't have your touch.
Everything is gone, this alphabet of nerve, these letters.

Yes, those were good times, the sunlight crossing
our bed, the bright windows, spring's love letters

Only the past hurts, that amputated limb
the failed transplant, the flesh stapled like your letters

Goodbye. You had, you said, enough of this
alphabet of pain & longing, this world in 26 letters.

You can't keep things in cages. They escape. And so
the best prayers I have for you fly out: just letters.

Don't you think I cried enough? So many years
walking dazed with lust, with your names few letters

All night the cat plays with the mice. They run
& toss, reminding me of us, love, this life's smeared letters

Dirt on my hands. Another lettuce, raw, more flavors
You like the dahlias best & the foxglove's curious letters.

Okay. The lilacs never bloomed. The children left.
You won't remember me, having burnt my letters.

It's no one's fault, the way the sail jerks out.
I learned to love like this, shaping the letters.

Before, all was the word, I've read, inscribed
on flesh & leaf & stone. Do you believe god lives in letters?

I try to praise it, this breaking life. Someday
this body too will find earth's envelope: dead letters.

Kathy Epling

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