

SCENTED PELARGONIUMS: SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE

Kathleen Szabo, MGV '93



I love scented geraniums, or more correctly, pelargoniums. They are not grown for their flowers as are the more common bedding varieties we all know. These are grown for their luscious scents – rose, chocolate mint, apple, lemon, nutmeg, coconut, pine—and for their textured and/or variegated leaves. Some do produce pretty flowers, but they are diminutive and take a back seat to the leaves. Some leaves are soft like velvet, some are splashed with chocolate brown, some are lacy and seem dusted with snow, and some are tiny and crinkled. Many varieties grow plump and bushy while others stay thin and stick-like. Others have a trailing habit. They range in height from under a foot to six feet. Their spread varies widely also.

Among these plants there is something for everyone. Scented pelargoniums originated in South Africa and became very popular in Victorian times. Their popularity has waxed and waned over the years but they seem to be making a comeback. It was named herb of the year in 2006 by the International Herb Association. They are classified by their scents: rose, mint, citrus, spicy and pungent woody. Some smell just as described, especially the rose, lemon and mint types. Others are a mystery as to how they were named. Hybridization has produced literally hundreds of cultivars, which have been used

in perfumes, as folk medicine, and in cooking.

Plants prefer well-drained soil with a pH of around 6.5. Most require full sun to thrive. When watering, less is more. Too much water or fertilizer will compromise the scent of your plant, so be sure to let it dry out before the next watering. Pruning will keep your plant bushy. Pinch out the center when the plant is 6" tall. Continue to pinch if the plants start to get leggy. The preferred method of propagating pelargoniums is from stem cuttings.



These plants are perfect for planting along pathways where brushing against them will release their scent. They are also very nice in planters and window boxes. Of course, the herb garden is a natural place for them to grow. I like to plant three pelargoniums in a large pot – 2 different scented varieties and one traditional type with nice flowers. These pots add lots of variety to my patio. The small leaved varieties such as *P. crispum* can even be trained into standards or bonsais. Since they are hardy only to zone 10, scented pelargoniums must be taken inside and grown on a sunny windowsill or under lights during the winter. For this reason, some

continued on next page

gardeners like to keep their plants in pots, lifting the whole pot out of the soil in the fall.

Besides adding scent and texture to the garden, there are many other uses for your scented pelargoniums. Victorians used lemon scented ones in fingerbowls and many types for tussie-mussies and in potpourris. They are great for adding texture and aroma to bouquets. I love using them as fillers to take the place of Baker's fern in floral arrangements. Receivers are always delighted when they discover these hidden scents.

Rose geranium leaves are not only beautiful, but have been a favorite for decades to flavor cakes. Attar of Roses has been the standard variety used. Just lay some fresh, clean leaves on the bottom of a cake pan before pouring in the batter. The flavor will permeate the whole cake. You can add leaves to teas, punches, wines, vodkas, vinegars, marinades, jellies and even sugar. Experiment with different varieties to see what you like.

Don't be fooled by nurseries selling *P. citrosa* or "citronella, plant" as a deterrent against mosquitoes and other biting insects. These are not related to true citronella and, unfortunately, science has disproved this claim. But it has a refreshing citronella smell and attractive leaves.

I urge you to try a scented pelargonium or two this summer. You'll be so glad you did when you brush up against one and take in the delightful fragrance.



Photo Credits (previous page):

Top: Justine Hand for Gardenista

Center: 'Concor Lace' from Silver Leaf Greenhouses

(this page): Microsoft Publisher Clip Art