



UConn
COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURE,
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ARCHITECTURE

UConn Home and Garden Education
Center
U-4115, 1380 Storrs Road
Storrs, CT 06269-4115
877-486-6271

www.ladybug.uconn.edu
uconnladybug.wordpress.com

Make Mine Vanilla!

By Dawn Pettinelli, UConn Home & Garden Education Center



Hot summer weather has many of us seeking tasty relief at their local ice cream parlors. Despite a dizzying array of flavors, plain old vanilla ranks high in popularity. Natural vanilla flavoring comes from vanilla beans which are produced in pods by an orchid. Most of the world's vanilla beans are grown in Madagascar. This past year saw a shortage of vanilla beans from that country which is why you may have noticed the price of real vanilla extract at the stores has increased.

If you are looking for some calorie-free ways to enjoy the delicious scent of vanilla, look no further than the garden. A number of plants have a luscious vanilla scents include annuals, perennials, trees, shrubs and vines. Do keep in mind that fragrances take on a personal tone so what some might perceive as vanilla, others may detect a slightly different odor.

Most popular as well as easy to find are heliotropes (*Heliotropium arborescens*). These annual plants mostly found in shades of purple have large clusters of vanilla-scented flowers. They can be used as bedding plants but many find their way into containers placed near entranceways or on decks where their delicious fragrance can be repeatedly enjoyed. Plants grow about a foot tall. I think the white flowering form has a stronger vanilla scent than the purple but it is harder to find.

Years ago when working at Old Sturbridge Village, we tended a collection of scented geraniums including apple, coconut, nutmeg, lemon, peppermint and vanilla. With geraniums, it is the leaves that carries the delightful scents. French vanilla geraniums have small sprays of white flowers and work well in containers in full sun.

Another plant grown at OSV was mignonette (*Reseda odorata*). Flowers are rather inconspicuous with small creamy whitish blossoms but their fragrance is a heavenly raspberry vanilla. I have never seen this annual for sale at garden centers but it is easy to start this plant from seed.

Although technical a valerian (*Valeriana officinalis*), the white flower clusters of the often called garden heliotrope are attractive to pollinators and people alike. It is blooming right now. This hardy perennial gets about 3 feet tall in my garden but would probably grow taller if in a moister situation. The leaves are toothed and pinnate. It spreads slowly if happy and is native to Europe and western Asia.

Many are familiar with our native Joe Pye weed (*Eutrochium purpureum*) as a good wildlife plant as well as useful cut flower but have you stopped and smelled it. A soft vanilla fragrance is emitted upon close inspection (or should I say sniffing!). Plants reach 4 to 5 feet tall and enjoy moist soils in full sun. Plants are hardy to zone 4 and flowers are arranged in large clusters in shades of mauves and pinks.

While most dianthus have a spicy scent, 'Itsaul White' (*Dianthus plumarius*) smells like vanilla. Pure white, fringed, semi-double flowers attract butterflies. While the plant only blooms from late spring to early summer, the silvery blue foliage remains attractive all season long. Plants are compact reaching only 12 inches high and are hardy to zone 3.

Clematis montana selections are vigorous, vines reaching 20 to 30 feet. They are spring blooming but have a light, delightful vanilla fragrance. Look for the white flowered, 'Grandiflora', pink-flowered 'Elizabeth' or 'Mayleen'. These plants are very attractive grown on a fence or over a trellis. For abundant flowering, plant them in full sun with their roots shaded through the use of mulch or plantings positioned behind other fuller but low plant selections.

The name 'Vanilla Spice' should clue you in that this selection of summersweet (*Clethra alnifolia*) is especially aromatic. Plants grow up to 6 feet tall and wide and have larger white flowers than the species which is native to many east coast states. Usually this shrub is found in moist locations and it prefers our native, slightly acidic soils. 'Hummingbird' is a dwarf selection reaching only 2 feet tall while 'Ruby Spice' is a full-sized plant with deep pink flowers. Blooms occur in late summer and are always covered with bees and other pollinators.

Native to Korea, the white forsythia (*Abeliophyllum distichum*) is a small shrub, about 4 feet tall. Rather unassuming, the pale pink buds open to mostly white, lightly vanilla scented flowers in early spring. It is a very undemanding plant tolerating a wide variety of soil conditions and hardy to zone 5. Plant white forsythia in full sun to part shade.

Visiting the Grand Canyon last November, our tour guide brought us to some old copper mines now surrounded by ponderosa pines (*Pinus ponderosa*). It was a warm November day and he had us all smell the reddish crackly bark of these tall, magnificent trees. They smelled just like vanilla flavored, fresh baked sugar cookies. I remember that Jeffrey pines (*P. jeffreyi*) in Oregon had a similar scent. Both are quite sizeable trees but they are hardy in this area.

Plants are grown for many reasons but maybe one consideration when selecting some for your garden might be their scent. So be sure to smell the flowers and you can bask in their scents making pulling weeds and putting down mulch much more pleasant tasks.

If you have questions about any of the plants mentioned above or on any other gardening topic, contact the UConn Home & Garden Education Center, toll-free, at (877) 486-6271, visit our web site at www.ladybug.uconn.edu or contact your local Cooperative Extension Center.