

HOUSE
GARDEN

HAMAMELIS ORANGE

CORYLOPSIS

OSMANTHUS

SARCOCOCCA

HIDDEN PLEASURES

HAMAMELIS YELLOW

ELAEAGNUS FLOWER

VIBURNUM

FOTHERGILLA MONTICOLA

MAHONIA

When people are choosing plants the most common things they ask about is whether the plant is deciduous or evergreen and the shape and season of flowering.

Unfortunately the one thing they rarely ask about and therefore miss out on, unless by chance, is scent. There are times, that even when the garden is apparently full of interest, that scent can add that extra sensory dimension. Scented plants particularly come into their own during the winter and spring seasons when flowering is often minimal.

Some of the best scented garden plants don't unfortunately produce the largest or most showy flowers. I admit that during the summer, there are plants that provide both showy flowers and some fantastic scents, such as the musk roses, but often this is not the case. Summer flowering plants benefit from the fact that plant breeders have put a lot more effort into breeding them, combining the best features of the different plants available.

In my view the best scented plants are actually winter

flowering ones. The reason for this is that nature has developed the scent to attract pollinating insects. At this time of year these insects are very few and far between, so plants that want to be pollinated need to attract them over distances much greater than colourful petals on its own would do. Whether plants produce colourful flowers or highly scented ones, this uses a lot of energy, at a time when the winter sun is weak and therefore the plant is producing very little. A lot of winter flowers have developed very small flowers, but very scented ones as they have evolved to put all their energy into producing as much scent as possible to allow it to be carried in the wind as far as possible.

It is true to say that encountering a nice scent when you venture outside during the winter naturally has more effect. Your senses are less distracted by visual stimuli and this allows the brain to register scents more acutely. Winter also tends to benefit scent as the air tends to be heavy keeping the scent low to the ground at head level and cooler temperatures dissipate the scent slower.

The range of winter scented flowering plants is vast however I will stick to my choice of shrubs which most people would be able to find room somewhere in their garden for.

One of my favourite scented flowering shrubs is the 'Witch Hazel' or Hamamelis, it comes in a number of varieties with different flower colour but they all have little spidery flowers, that they produce Dec/Jan, which are sweetly scented in common. Stood out on their own the flowers do show up on the bare stems, but are less significant in mixed borders however on a warm day the scent is unmistakable a nice change from the usual damp smell of a cold winters day. The only other time this plant excels is when it produces its autumn foliage in hues of red, orange and yellow.

Other similar shrubs are the 'Winter Hazel' or Corylopsis pauciflora, which produces cowslip scented primrose yellow flowers and 'Winter Sweet' or Chimonanthus praecox which has small yellow scented flowers.

'Oleaster' or Elaeagnus x ebbingei

is another favourite. This shrub has the advantage of being a silvery green evergreen shrub that can be used as screening or as a backdrop to borders. Related plants are available in different leaf colours. Its flowers are very difficult to see in amongst the foliage, they are a creamy white and a similar shape and size to a clove, but produce a scent that would make most people stop in their tracks to work out where it was coming from.

My last recommendation, as I am running out of room and time, are the Daphnes. These come in both evergreen and deciduous varieties. The evergreen Daphne odora aurea marginata has a narrow yellow leaf margin but is grown primarily for its reddish purple scented flowers. This is definitely not a plant to be hidden away.

To get advice regarding these and other scented plants take some time out and visit your specialist plant nursery where I am sure help will be on hand.

The Big Plant Centre at Pantiles, Altmers Road, Lyne, Chertsey, Surrey KT16 0BJ or call 01932 872195 or visit the website at www.bigplantcentre.co.uk.