



# Lowcountry Master Gardener Association

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## MOON GARDENS AND FLOWERS THAT RELEASE THEIR FRAGRANCE AT NIGHT

Since we're going to talk about flowers and gardens, it's interesting to note that flower seeds weren't commercially sold in the US until the mid 1700's. Most flower seeds were traded between households and were known as "passalongs. Flower gardens as we know them today, gardens meant only to please the senses, are a fairly recent phenomenon, first becoming popular in America in the 1800's'. The first American garden club was organized here in the south, in 1891.

We're going to talk today about FLOWERS THAT BLOOM OR /RELEASE THEIR FRAGRANCE AT NIGHT and Moon Gardens.

Why DO flowers bloom at night? To feed night flying creatures such as moths, and some beetles. They feed on the pollen and nectar of these flowers. These night flyers act as pollinators for nocturnal flowers just as butterflies, hummingbirds and bees act as pollinators for day blooming flowers.

Most night blooming flowers are white or pastel, and are fragrant. It's their visibility in the dark and their fragrance that attract the pollinators.

Most day blooming flowers stay open day and night until the flowers are spent. A notable exception is **Portulaca, or Moss Rose**, which goes to sleep as the sun goes down.

The species known as diurnal or day blooming flowers number in the thousands. The world of nocturnal flowers in comparison is small.

When night begins for flowers is different from when it begins for us. The signal for most nocturnals to bloom is when the sun loses its intensity. For example, **Mirabilis** are called 4 o'clocks because that's about the time their tubular flowers begin to open. Once open, most night blooming flowers continue only through to mid morning of the next day. Some just go to sleep and re-awaken again at night, but some are wilted and spent.

Before we decide what goes into our moon garden, we need to decide where it goes.

Ideally, it should be visible from areas where you spend the most time.....screen porch, family room, or kitchen.

Moon gardens need two things....flowers that reflect moonlight and flowers that are fragrant at night.

I'm going to include some tender plants which need to be brought inside for the winter, but there is no reason not to use them in your Moon Garden. Here are some suggestions:

An unusual nocturnal plant is **Night blooming cereus**. It blooms rarely and only after dark, It usually begins to open by 9:00 or 10:00, and is fully open by midnight. Once the bud begins to form, it enlarges rapidly. The usually down hanging bud begins to point upward as a signal that it will bloom that evening. And when it blooms, it's often an excuse a party. The neighbors are invited over and the people who get to see this event and smell the flower are very



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lucky. They can actually see the bud tremble as it begins to expand. The beautiful and fragrant flower has only a few hours to work its magic,--it's wilted and dead by dawn

This is a house plant, but likes to spend the summer outside. It is a member of the cactus family, so don't overwater.

**Night Blooming Jasmine** not a true Jasmine,--*Cestrum nocturnum*.. It's marginally hardy here but will winter over in a protected spot. I planted one just outside my bedroom. Planted near an open window, it will perfume the entire room. In constant bloom from spring to late fall. It's a shrub which can get 4 feet high.

Every garden needs vertical interest.....**Moon Flower**, or Moon Vine are perfect for this. *Ipomoea alba*. During the day, the buds look like long tubes wrapped in white silk. In late afternoon, you can actually watch the beautiful 5 to 6 inch saucer shaped flowers open. It takes about five minutes. It is an aggressive climber that will climb on just about anything,,,,,shephards crooks, trees, shrubs. It is an annual that will self seed in the same year, but those seedlings rarely get mature enough to flower before the first frost. They're easily started from seeds. In January or February, use a nail clipper to nip off the tip of the seed and soak overnight. They germinate in about a week.

Resist the temptation to set them out during the first warm week of spring. Wait until the nights are reliably over 50 degrees. Set them out when you would set out tomato plants.

Seeds are available everywhere, but it's easy to collect a few seedpods from your first vine for next season. Collect them before the first frost which kills the vine and turns it black. Leave the seeds in the pod until they're totally dry.



**The 4:o'clocks** we talked about earlier are perennial here, and will bloom the first year from seed. Oddly for a nocturnal flower, it comes in a variety of bright colors, sometimes on the same plant, but I've never seen a white one. As the name implies, these begin to open in late afternoon and stay open until mid morning the next day, when they will nap to open again late afternoon.

The fragrance isn't pervasive, you need to get up close. For a perennial plant, it has a long blooming period,--from late spring until late fall. Easily started from seeds, but once you have them, you will always have them,-- they're like diamonds. They are forever! They are prolific self seeders.

For a flower that's called "Daylily", there are some that bloom only at night. You probably won't find them at a local big nursery, but there are specialty nurseries on line that carry them. You might try the "Daylily Lady" right here on St. Helena.



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And one of the few Hostas that are grown with some success here in the Lowcountry is *Hosta plantagina*, or August Lily. The late summer blooming flowers are unusually large for a hosta, and can be used as cut flowers. They have a fragrance that reminds you of pure honey. During the day, the flowers look rather tired, but come evening, they open fully, along with newer blossoms which are added along the scape.

**Night Blooming Phlox *Zaluzianskia***. A fancy name for an insignificant flower, but it releases a powerful fragrance at night.

Another plain Jane plant grown only for fragrance is ***Reseda* or *Mignonette***. It is said that Napoleon found these plants growing on the banks of the Nile and was so enchanted with the fragrance that he brought seeds to Josephine, who planted them in pots on her balcony. She named them “mignonette”, which in French means “little darling”. Only available from seeds.

**Night Blooming Stock *Matthiola longipetala***. Everyone knows how fragrant stock is, and it's readily available at nurseries in the spring. However, the night blooming variety is almost never found in nurseries and must be started from seeds. It's hard to believe that these small flowers can release such a sultry fragrance.

Like vanilla and cloves. It's one of those flowers that once you have it in your garden, you'll always want it in your garden. Might self seed if it's happy, but save some seeds for next year.

**Lady of the Night *Brunfelsia Americana*** is a shrub that can reach 6', but usually stays much smaller. Small white flowers turn to cream as they age, and they release a gardenia like fragrance when the sun goes down. Blooms repeatedly. It would be a very pretty addition to the garden even if it wasn't fragrant. Marginally hardy here. I keep mine in a pot just to be safe, and just set the pot out right in the garden for the summer.

**Queen of the Night** A lot of flowers have feminine names....I can't think of a single one named for a man....I think it's because we smell so much better than men.

***Hylocereus undatis*** Not hardy here, but can be wintered inside if you have the room. A lot of room. It's a member of the cactus family and branches can reach 40 feet! These nocturnal flowers are huge. Some of the biggest in the plant kingdom. Up to 15 inches across. It produces the fruit known as Dragon Fruit. The peculiar looking fruit can sometimes be found in upscale markets. There are some wonderful examples of this plant at the Coastal Bamboo Farm near Savannah. At their Fall Festival, they give away a taste sample of the fruit. Actually much prettier than it is tasty.

***Nicotiana alata* Jasmine Tobacco**. Looks pretty scraggly by day, it becomes regal and stately once the sun goes down and its white trumpets perfume the night. Not anything like the muddy colors you see at nurseries in spring which aren't fragrant at all. Again, you must plant your own seeds. Sometimes self sows.

**Rangoon Creeper *Quisqualis indica***

*Quisqualis* is latin for Who? What? Because taxonomists couldn't decide if it was a vine or a shrub. It's included in the book, “Flowering Vines of the World” as one of the 50 most beautiful. Clusters of 3 inch tubes open white at night,



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turning pink at daybreak and finally a rich red. All three are open simultaneously on the vine. At night, it exudes a rich and heady perfume. Blooms from early summer until late fall. One of my favorite plants. Spectacular!

Needs lots of sun, but must be brought indoors to a bright window in the winter.



**Ric Rack Cactus** (Another rather common house plant in Beaufort, thanks to Ned Rahn of Plant Folks. Each blossom can be up to six inches in diameter. When it blooms, the hanging arms bloom prolifically, like Christmas cactus, but it never blooms at all for some people. (Like me!) Likes to summer outside. Mature plants can be painfully spiny, so be careful when handling.

### Rain Lily

There are many species, but one is a giant,--with 4" lily-like pure white blossoms which bloom most profusely after a drenching rain. They're fragrant only at night.

Watering with a hose doesn't trigger the same response. It is thought that the nitrogen captured in rainwater is the catalyst which produces heavy bloom.

Our own native **Rain Lily, the Atamasco lily** is a charming, small spring bloomer that will self sow where happy. It's available at the Native Plant Sale in Spring Island.

**Tuberose**, Polyanthea tuberosa. Tuberose.....These are arguably the most elegantly scented flowers and the fragrance is the basis of some very high end perfumes such as Fracas and Chepres, and in Madonna's signature perfume "Truth or Dare".

Tuberose fell out of favor in the 20<sup>th</sup> century because their fragrance was associated with funerals. Tuberose has a colorful history. They were discovered in Mexico by Cortez. The Aztecs cultivated and used them in some of their more gruesome rituals. Cortez annihilated the Aztec civilization, but these flowers managed to survive, and made their way to France via a missionary returning from the Indies.

Plant in late winter or early spring and you'll be rewarded with deliciously fragrant and exotic flowers mid to late summer. Be sure and feed them often and they'll reward you with many offsets. Planted offsets often won't flower the first year, but you'll soon have a large stand of them. Whether in the ground or in pots, they need a dry period, so wait until the foliage dies and lift them and let them dry for a few days before storing them in peat moss, sawdust or vermiculite.



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Usually a pot plant, it can be placed in the garden, in its pot, and brought into your garage for the winter.

Some lovely day bloomers release their best fragrance at night. Roses, for example, are most fragrant when the sun goes down or before the heat becomes intense in the day. **Angel's Trumpets** (*Brugmansia*) come in a variety of colors and are mildly fragrant during the day if you put your nose in a blossom and sniff. But when it gets dark, the pretty trumpet skirt actually elongates and becomes more turgid and releases a heady, seductive fragrance. No wonder it attracts pollinators.

Although it flowers for only a few weeks in the spring, **Kleim's Hardy Gardenia** (not to be confused with the ones which are used for hedges) is a small evergreen shrub that is so covered with intoxicatingly fragrant single white flowers that you can barely see the foliage. This is not an exaggeration. Every Moon Garden should have one.

**Sweet Almond Bush**. Although it's not evergreen every winter, its inflorescences of white flowers bloom their heads off all spring, summer and fall. It has a fragrance of vanilla and almond that is perceptible across the yard. I've seen a few available local nurseries.

So many citrus are dwarf and all citrus blossoms are sweet. It's no wonder orange blossoms are associated with weddings. If you have room, plant one of the smaller **Ponkan** or **Satsuma Mandarin oranges**. You'll be rewarded with fruit, too. And they're quite hardy here.

And this last one might surprise some of you. It's **Tillandsia usneoides**. It flowers here in the Lowcountry in late spring or early summer and continues for about a month. The flowers are miniscule and are pollinated by tiny moths. That elusive fragrance you smell, wafted by breezes on humid nights (aren't they all?), is generated by the flowers of this bromeliad. Surprise! It's Spanish Moss....not Spanish, and not a moss at all. It suffers from a bad rep, but actually, it is not a parasite. It takes no nourishment from tree branches that act as supports and it will not prevent sunlight from reaching the tree's leaves or hinder the tree from manufacturing food. However, don't make the mistake of harvesting it and using it for crafts unless you soak it in a clorox solution, or microwave it. It harbors tiny red bugs which really bite!!

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