

The Scented Garden

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Folks select landscape and garden plantings for different reasons, such as beautification, prevent erosion, help pollinators, and entice wildlife. Some species offer an added benefit of lofting wonderful aromas, i.e., they are detected from short distances and not just directly sniffing the blossom. This article features four Virginia natives with staggered bloom periods so that when planted together, each adds fragrancy to the yard throughout much of the growing season. The flowering times are what Northern Virginia residents can expect but may shift according to the predominant weather patterns during that year. Whereas artificial fragrances, especially perfumes and colognes, may trigger headaches in people, folks prone to migraines generally like the odors emitted from the plants listed here without adverse reactions.

By mid-April, woodland phlox (*Phlox divaricata*) is out in full bloom. It prefers woodland environments with shade to partial sun. Its alternative common name, wild blue phlox, indicates the color though it comes in varying intensities and hues, from purple tones to nearly white. The fragrance is gentle; planting them throughout the yard intensifies the collective floral smells. Woodland phlox grows low so it can be added next to walkways and give passers by a whiff. It spreads both vegetatively and by seed.

True to its common name, summersweet (*Clethra alnifolia*) infuses the air with a strong, sweet essence from late July to mid-August. Pollinators gravitate to the cream-colored flowers. Though some [wild type](#) specimens have slight blushing, the 'Ruby Spice' cultivar has pink blossoms. Planting wild types whenever possible helps preserve the species' genetic diversity. Reaching 5-10 feet high, this bog bush prefers wet soil with full sun (perfect for [rain gardens](#)) but can do well in drier, partial shade areas. Once established, the roots send out suckers. Also called sweetpepperbush for the fruits' appearance, it is the only one listed here that is non-native to Fairfax County, but is found throughout eastern Virginia from Stafford County down to the North Carolina boarder.

Picking up where summersweet left off, late boneset blooms in the first month of meteorological autumn: late August through mid-September. Officially called *Eupatorium serotinum*, the stalks may exceed 6 feet, topped by large clusters of tiny, white flowers. Those flowers fill the air with a delicious honey aroma. As do many other aster species, the blooms attract multitudes of pollinating insects—from majestic monarch butterflies to nearly microscopic bees. "Boneset" is a name shared amongst several related meadow plants that were falsely believed to help heal broken bones.

American witch hazel (*Hamamelis virginiana*) is one of the last natives to flower. Its spindly yellow blossoms open around mid-October. As the petals blend with witch hazel's golden autumn foliage, the unique floral smell announces the buds are opening. The flowers become more visually conspicuous when they

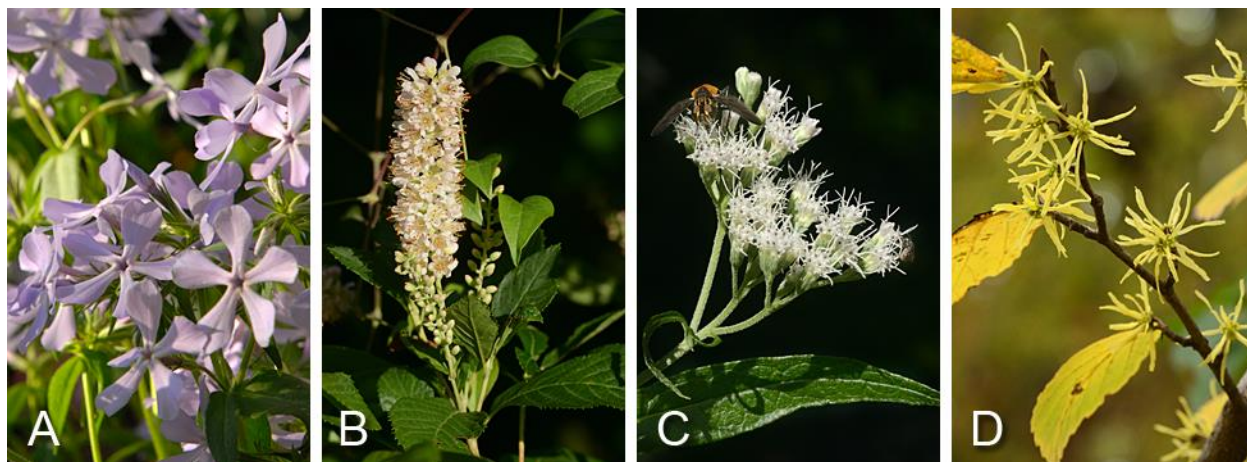


Figure 1. Scented Virginia natives include A) woodland phlox, B) summersweet, C) late boneset, and D) witch hazel. Some of these images also show the pollinators attracted to these plants.

remain on the branches long after the leaves drop. Bloom time lasts through much of November and sometimes into early December. On windless days, the delicate fragrances are detectable 100 feet away from a single blooming tree. In the wild, these small trees populate forest understories. Tinctures and extracts made from witch hazel date back to the American Indians and are still used today.

Creating a native scented garden is more than planting species that sport aromatic flowers. Foliage and bark add wonderful smells. Unlike blossoms that emit volatile compounds on their own, leaves must be rubbed or brushed against and bark scraped to release those odor chemicals. It makes yardwork around these plants smell delicious, especially around short-toothed mountain mint and spicebush! Mountain mint (*Pycnanthemum muticum*) grows in many different soil and light conditions, thriving in native meadows to forest edges. Its stalks reach 2-3 feet tall. The pale, sea green to emerald leaves may be used to flavor simple syrups. It can spread through rhizomes but lacks peppermint's aggressive growth.

Reaching 15 feet in forest settings, spicebush (*Lindera benzoin*) has small, yellow flowers in the spring that are a footnote compared to its stunning golden fall foliage and scarlet fruits. Historically, people consumed zesty parts of spicebush, for instance, making teas from the leaves and bark or substituting powdered fruits for allspice. Both spicebush and mountain mint are predominantly deer-resistant while offering other species nourishment, such as the many pollinators attracted to the mint flowers. Birds and some mammals eat spicebush fruits while the spicebush swallowtail (*Papilio troilus*) caterpillars munch on these leaves and those of sassafras (*Sassafras albidum*).

In addition to enhancing the landscape with scents, planting any or all of these species brings a visual impact, too! Watch the way these plants give a helping hand to local wildlife through food resources and habitat. Sit back and enjoy the smell of sweet success!

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Figure 2. Spicebush (A, in autumn) and mountain mint (B, in summer with a potter wasp) are two species with scented leaves and bark or stems. Their twigs or dried husks retain the odor compounds throughout winter and add aromas to the garden year-round.