

The Botanical Fragrance Categories

I've tried my hand at organizing groups of scents based on how I perceive the way flowers and leaves smell. Here are the dozen categories I've arrived at for my encyclopedia of fragrant plants, along with a vocabulary of associations that should help the reader form a sensory picture of each one. As most plants offer blends, I've picked what I perceive as the primary scent of each plant as my organizing principle.

ANIMALIC: skunky-sulfurous, putrid like rotting flesh, fishy, feline urine, bodily odors including sweat and musk, vomit, yeasty

BALSAMIC/RESINOUS: maple syrup, coconut, coffee, smoke, camphorous, masculine, leather, sticky, caramel, burned sugar, wood, almond extract, vanilla

FLORAL/SWEET: light, butter, candy, lily of the valley, honeysuckle, daylily, primrose, mock orange

FOREST: moss, pine, turpentine, balsam fir and cedar, wood, oakmoss, patchouli, woodland floor, earth, soil, mushrooms, fungi

FRUITY: tart, aromatic, apricot, lemon, citronella, berry, fig, plum, banana, bergamot, grape soda, cherry, lime, pineapple, strawberry

HEAVY: Oriental lily, winter jasmine, orange blossom, perfume, lush, intense, creamy, forceful scents that are rich, deep, and unforgettable—too much for some people but thrilling to others

HERBAL/GREEN: anise, licorice, green tea, crisp, oregano, thyme, light mint, the smell of an herbaceous stem breaking,

leafy herbs, green peas, freshly cut grass, new-mown hay—
lively and uplifting

HONEY: thick, rich, syrupy, flowery, meadow, nutty, aged cheese,
and when it goes too far, cloying—sickly sweet, fishy, bleachy

INDOLIC: mothballs, hot garbage, overripe fruit, dusty,
excrement, moldy, a scent that usually hides in the
background of heavy fragrances and may just seem sweet

MEDICINAL: acrid, antiseptic, biting, menthol, metallic,
peppermint, plastic, pungent, chrysanthemum, wintergreen,
oily sage, motor oil, burning leaves, eucalyptus, artemisia
leaves

ROSE: baby powder, apple, anise, myrrh, clove, musk, feminine
(old rose), black tea, fruit, plum, peach, berry, spice (modern
rose)

SPICE: sharp, geranium, curry, clove, cinnamon, pepper, tart,
nutmeg, ginger, turmeric, allspice, cloves, cinnamon, nutmeg,
coriander

Many, even most, plants combine elements of these groups, but I
hope to have classified each by its primary aroma. Under each
category heading, I have featured favorite plants to learn about
and consider when next you encounter them (or shop).