

## The Scent of September by Jenny Dean

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Most evenings I walk my dappled grey horse out into the fields bordering an indigenous forest. We spend an enchanted hour together – him grazing grass while I sit next to him absorbing the sounds and scents of the early night. I watch the Drongos flitting from branch to branch snatching up a last insect snack before the darkness settles. Bats dip and swoop before us. Signs of bushpig, those snuffling hirsute nocturnal visitors, are everywhere – Arum lilies dug up, their flowers tossed aside in favour of their fleshy roots. Sometimes a grey duiker will emerge tiptoeing quietly across the forest edge .

The scent of spring is all around. A large flat-crown is resplendent with fluffy white blossom – by day butterflies dance above its leafy umbrella crown and as the sun sets the fragrance is strong and sweet. I breathe and breathe...

Wandering in search of the next grassy patch we walk under a September bells (*Rothmannia globosa*). The fragrance is still strong and sweet but different. White tubes with yellow throats flecked with pink grace the tree – so prolific as to almost obscure the dark green foliage. The trees emerge like white clouds from the forest canopy – bright lights in the dusk.

It is a White September ... the *Dombeyas* are in full blossom – a gentle fragrance this. Gnarled and craggy stemmed *Dombeya rotundifolia* bears its load of papery white flowers best smelled up close. *Dombeya burgessiae* sprawls in lax fashion heavy with clutches of white flowers with pink hearts – a honey- like scent attractive to bees too.

Biggest surprise of all are the Sneezewoods (*Ptaeroxylon obliquum*). Pale yellow flowers adorn bare branches – and once again the scent is different, impossible to describe but thrilling nonetheless. Before the flowers emerge the leaves turn bright yellow before falling. This very dry spring has stressed the trees and brought about this great flowering display. Large trees are scarce now, having been heavily used for timber in the past – furniture, railway sleepers and fence poles. The wood is strong and resistant to termites – it was also used for disselboom (axles) for the wagons of old. Pieces of the wood can be used as an insect repellent. Useful to humans in days gone by and food plant for the Citrus Swallowtail butterfly, I love it purely for its fragrance.

Once in Zimbabwe, I came across a swathe of Bluebushes, *Diospyros lycioides*, all neatly browsed by antelope to the same level – a gardener could not have had a neater hedge. The fragrance was heavenly, and even now a slight sniff of it transports me back to that time. This splendid shrub is little known perhaps because the flowers are insignificant and therefore little used by landscapers and gardeners. The Mooi River Opal Butterfly uses the Bluebush as a food plant. The twigs are used as toothbrushes by local people.

The shady interior of the forest houses *Diospyros whyteana* (the common name of Bladdernut is wholly uninspiring I always think). Shiny green leaves and slow growth habit makes it an ideal hedge for a formal garden. Flowers are tiny white bells with a big scent. I imagine the pollinators being drawn to the plant, enticed by fragrance, not bright, showy flowers, and I marvel at Nature.

*Dracaena aleytriformis* the Large –leaved Dragon tree cluster in small groups, sheltered in the shade of the forest trees. Spikes of scented white flowers attract nocturnal insects, and the plants are a favourite nesting place for Robin –chats. Pooley's *Trees of Eastern SA* states that field mice also nest in the leaves - how lovely! The Bush Nightfighter butterfly uses *Dracaena* as a food plant. This is the perfect plant for a shady spot near a window although some people find the scent to be cloying. I have no such qualms and love it for its fragrance and usefulness to wild creatures.

The Honeysuckle tree (*Turraea floribunda*) is yet another delight. A scrambling deciduous little tree, it blends in with its neighbours until spring when large creamy green bell- like flowers burst from bare branches – sweetly and strongly scented. Floribunda means many flowers – a clue to this *Turraea*'s beauty. Sunbirds and hawk moths are pollinators.

Although the *Buddleja* shrubs are not here in my horse space, they must not be left out of an article on fragrance. *Buddleja salvifolia* (Quilted Sagewood) - favourite food of eland in the Berg – is laden with scented blossom, some white, some mauve with orange throats. It has a scrambling slightly wild growth habit and makes a good if rambling hedge in frosty areas. I love *Buddleja loricata*, the Mountain Sagewood – a dense shrub similar to *B. salvifolia* with narrower stiffer leaves. This is very little known and makes a superb neat hedge for cold gardens. Once again the flowers are sweetly scented.

Sister *Buddleja auriculata* (Weeping Sagewood) flowers between May and August, and its sweetly scented flowers are a magnet for insects. My wild clump at home is frequented by Dusky Flycatcher and Bar-throated Apalis – both cute little insectivorous birds. All the *Buddleja* are attractive to insects which make them essential in a wildlife-friendly garden. Here I stray from my topic of scented plants to mention *Buddleja glomerata* for those gardeners in hot and frosty places. Known as the Karoo Sage this shrub is tolerant of temperatures between -5 and +30°C. Perfect for hot and frosty Karoo and Free State gardens. Although the flowers are not scented their bright yellow stands out in lovely contrast with the bluish grey foliage. This *Buddleja* grows beautifully in a mild climate too – mine thrives as a focal point in my meadow garden.

And then we come to the *Nuxias*. The Forest Nuxia (*Nuxia floribunda*) is simply gorgeous in flower – a tall tree with stunning showy white bunches of little flowers – scented and attractive to many insects. The Wild-elder or Brittlewood Nuxia (*Nuxia congesta*) has stunning white puffs of tiny flowers and is also highly fragrant. Pooley's *Trees* states that it makes a good container plant – what a lovely idea! I plan to try it in a pot near my bench where I often have morning tea.

There are so many more scented plants we can use – Nature has been truly generous. *Acokanthera* (Poison Bushes), Small False Loquat (*Mitriostigma axillare*), *Carissa*, *Capparis*, *Ehretia*, *Xylothea*. Some are faintly scented and all the more special for their gentle fragrance which requires closer inspection.

My evening sojourn with Aries comes to a close, and we wander back to his stable, my senses alive with the delights of the fragrance all around, and my heart grateful for all the abundance Nature provides.