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Extreme of Things  
Nothing Like Love

# Led by the Nose

A Garden  
of Smells

Jenny Joseph



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To the long-suffering neighbours of my rural slum,  
Chick and Charmian Henwood:  
brilliant gardeners, very dear friends.

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# Introduction

Gardens are often talked of with a view to the colours, shapes, vistas and prospects that will delight the eye. ‘With a view to’ – precisely. Suggestions in books and gardening tips in newspapers and magazines help us to think in terms of giving a show of colour, of banking flowers in gradations of height to get the best display, of using leaves and space so as to give a foil to the shape or tint of our perfect blooms, of planting to give variety of light and shade, of mass to set off individual specimens, of a succession of colour, especially perhaps in dark corners, so that when the cotoneaster berries are dwindling and the bright beads no longer cheer the gloomy hedge they’re set against, the yellow stars of the winter jasmine are ready to catch the brief sunlight of a January frost.

It is only my *intended* garden, of course, that goes like this. In my *actual* garden, things grow and flower if, when and where they will, in the shape and size they – or, at any rate, not I – decide. This happens however much I pore over information on the backs of seed packets about expected height, however much I determine that this year I will do everything at the right time and be more strong-minded and in control.

My pleasure in other people’s gardens is different from the joys I get from my own. In other gardens, I stand and gaze gluttonously at the deep herbaceous borders with wonderful clumps stepped back in order of height and bulk, clear good brown soil in between, flowers out at the same time, immense variety of little delights setting each other off in the space beneath; at the rockeries with their delicate rock roses and miniatures, the gravel paths properly edged, the green sweep of grass with the flowering bush or birch tree dripping its fronds, the clumps of daffodils

in the grass at just the right distance beyond, towards the wild bit where there is a proper boarded square for different stages of compost set neatly against a wall and overhung with a beautiful spreading beech; poppies where they ought to be for their loud splashes of colour to have full effect, backed by a wall or clump of different taller green; or, at the front of the house with no garden, a stone trough or tub where the pansies don't straggle higher than the wallflowers and each petal glows.

But going into my garden is not like this. Every time, it is a journey of exploration, a voyage of discovery. It is in the mood of enquiry that I wander down my garden path. For I go to find out what has happened, rather than to order what shall be; to wonder what chance has brought it about that this year the peony has opened to a flower and not browned and shrivelled in the bud; to be pleased that the feathery fronds are indeed from the carrot seed I sowed and gave up for lost after the too heavy, too early rains, and not the love-in-a-mist that seeds itself and which I am not ruthless enough with, for it is pretty to have a bit of that scatty blue among the vegetables, and the feathery fronds do not seem rapacious like dock.

Even if I didn't like the taste of rhubarb, I would still grow it for that marvellous moment you get when, stumbling about in a dark day after what seems like weeks of shutting out even the fact that a garden is there at all, you suddenly see these protuberances, these fleshy knobs pushing through the earth. Of course, I put it there once. I decided, once, where it should be, but its appearing again now is still a wonderful surprise. I try to look after or at least appreciate what comes up, like someone who has planned a party but gives in to the circumstances when the guests turn it into something else.

'Being in the garden' therefore is a quite different activity from growing things to give us fine sights as a gardener proper does. I have never

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understood how anyone can feel they've been to a place by going (and remaining) in a car to look at a view. You must breathe the air of a place to know where you are, and being in your garden is, of course, being in its air and receiving its smells, as well as absorbing its appearance which those with sight can do.

I think many people who enjoy looking at things do also experience them through their noses, but we are far less conscious of what is coming in to us by that sense, and our experience of the world is rarely defined or discussed in terms of smell. I have always felt the battery of the world on my sense of smell as well as on my other senses and have been surprised sometimes that people don't use their noses more. (You cannot, of course, shut your nose as you can your eyes, and an acute or activated sense of smell is not an unmixed blessing.)

I remember going to look at fabrics in a shop with a friend, and she was ashamed of me because, while feeling a particular cloth, I smelt it. The nose is a useful means of information when choosing cloth; but smell is a bit of a taboo subject still.

I think of gardens and the life beyond them in terms of smell. Or rather, my life operates in terms of smell. It is not smell isolated from other sensations, of course. The untrappability and power of odour is that it mingles and moves with everything else on the air, light waves, sound waves, so that it is very enmeshed in one's whole situation.

This book is the result of my habit of operating through as many of my senses as possible. While I hope the book will be of interest to sighted people to remind them of a dimension (possibly overlooked) to their use of and enjoyment of plants, I hope blind people might benefit as well. Even if they haven't got gardens, they might like to hear about plants they could enjoy. By planting a garden with a sense of (not with a view to) what a blind person could enjoy, and therefore take an active part in, I imagine everyone's interest would be enhanced.

Finally, and basically, since the book is based on personal experience, to think that there are different sorts of garden might cheer those who, like myself, are never going to get their garden quite the way they had seen it in the mind's eye. Perhaps if our gardens smell heavenly, it doesn't matter too much if they don't look like the ones in the pictures.

# January



There is a young moon. A little light from a street lamp gleams on the ground, for the heavy frost has not weakened all day. It is fresh though still, but not yet brass-monkey freezing. It is rather mysterious in the shadowy garden, coatings of hoar re-ordering the prominence of the outlines, of clump, sack, rubbish, bush, wall and bench.

The leaves are crisp to the foot but, underneath the crackle, the grass they cover is soft and giving, comforting to the feet, almost silkily sliding-soft as I cross my patch of turf to a path in the corner.

The garden smells only of cold, with a whiff from the coal of fires hanging about because of the lack of wind. The frost does not kill the fumes that rise quite strongly from the road whenever a car

passes, even though the road is out of sight below my bottom garden wall.

My compost pile near this wall, usually odoriferous to say the least, gives off nothing, even when sniffed close up, not even from recent orange skins. My old manure next to it is indistinguishable, and from a handful of more recent manure not a whiff either. But when I grub around at the bottom of a cage of leaves, the lower layers of which are about three years there, and break off a crumbly handful from the compacted cake, I can tell it is leaf-mould by its smell. It is warm and dry and nice to my hand, and it smells of the woods.

I come back down the path to my back door. Here it is darker, sheltered by hedge and wall and shed. A clump of herb robert I let grow over a rotting log and pile of stones under the yew hedge had flourished late and vigorously in the warm autumn. I bent to where I remembered it had been, put my hand round some soft frail stems, the leaves little dark stipples against the dark, and at once I knew it was the herb robert – that pungent smell that hits you when you are pulling up its loose roots when weeding came with full force across the breathless air. You will not get rid of that rather cat-like acrid smell from your hands without a good wash, and as I went to do that I realized why a friend of mine, noticing the weed that I had let be, had admired the ‘pretty little pelargonium’.

If you have had a mild Christmas and only now remember to bring in any pots of geranium you tucked in protected corners near your back door, as I do, you have only to brush your finger against leaf or stalk, or pick off a dead leaf, and the smell, since there are not others to combat it, is as rank and rife as in hot summer. Not a pleasant smell but if it reminds us of hot sun on stone and gardens of the south, a smell worth releasing into the pure icy air of January.

There were two other things I picked up on my night errand. A

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couple of bits of sawn old floorboard, from my sawing session earlier in the day when the smell of pine had added to my pleasure in my box of kindling. Wood for the fire gets you warm twice: once when you saw, again when you burn it, and the pleasure to the nose is repeated. For nearly all purposes, including getting the right nasal memories attached to fires in winter, old used wood is best.

When I got in and put my geraniums on the window-sill, I found crumpled in my hand a yellow rose, not dead but translucent, mummified. The last rose of winter, it had stayed on the stem, just visible from my kitchen window when the wind bobbed it that way. Although bought for its scent – ‘Golden Showers’ – it has not yet fulfilled my expectations for perfuming that corner. I lifted the wan little remainder to my face, cool on my mouth, and as if from far away a faint echo of warmth and the busyness of another season flittered across the air in my kitchen like a ghost.

The first month of the year seems the longest, slowest one. By the time we start it properly, after the gap for New Year’s celebrations, daylight is already beginning to stretch, but the days may be cloudy and close, and we are often kept low by winter ills. If, at the end of January, a hard north wind quietens and swings south bringing a thaw, dispersing dank mists so we can see the sky and even the sun, the world is suddenly so full of colour and prettiness and activity that we feel we have taken a great leap into another season in one day.

Things have been happening all the time, of course – growth pushing, light unfurling. Now the buds that had made slight swellings on brittle twigs in December are opening into flower. The winter-flowering shrubs send out some of the strongest and most delicious fragrance of the year. It is as if they need very strong scent to get themselves noticed in cold weather. Chinese witch hazel, its name equally attractive in Latin (*Hamamelis mollis*), and the honeysuckle bush that declares itself to be

most fragrant, are among the earliest and therefore most cherished. Their flowers come in advance of their leaves, looking at first glance like excrescences, so the luxury of their smell is even more surprising as we have not been watching leaf buds break in anticipation.

In sheltered places, mahonia might start its long season now. Much used in public gardens, it gives good value of strong perfume free on the air possibly until late spring. Anyone trudging along the bleak underground passage from the tube station at South Kensington in London to visit the Natural History Museum may be uplifted, on emerging into the drizzle of a winter's day, by the shrub's warm heavy scent. An inspired bit of planning! They have planted mahonia bushes alongside the path that goes across a rather wearisome space to the distant entrance.

What we are most eager for are signs of life breaking through the dark cave of winter, pushing up through the ground into the day: snowdrops, the first early crocus, the first of the early irises – *Iris danfordiae*.

We go out to look closely at ground we have forgotten the existence of while we have kept warm inside. We may find snowdrops being lifted by the light above the surface of earth or snow where formerly they were like greeny white crumbs lying on the soil. They don't smell yet, but they will.

Janus, god of exits and entrances, was often figured as a sculpted two-faced head above porticos, one side facing backwards saying goodbye to the old year, the other looking ahead to the next one: god of nostalgia and memory, and equally of hope and anticipation, greeting the new. I think he would be appropriate as a garden god, for that is exactly what happens in a garden. There is nothing of which one can say more truly 'In my end is my beginning' than plants.

If I had a Janus head to set down in time not place, I would position him not on New Year's Eve, but about 18 January. He looks back to the cauled dim days of the winter solstice. The ground is either sodden, or

lifeless in the grip of frost. If we have this remission, this break, this volte-face in late January, he will perhaps spy a scrap of pale yellow among a clump of leaves suddenly green where we had seen nothing but dark hedge before – a primrose sheltering under dull twigs, like an eye peeping, a bright slit under a weary eyelid.

A gleam of sun comes through the warp of twigs of the bare hedge, falling across the face of my Janus. It lights up the curve of his finely carved brow, the ridge of his nose and one smooth cheek and nostril. A little breeze makes the sunbeam ripple shadows across it, the nostril flares, tensed with drawing in air.

He is prognosticating not looking forward, my garden Janus, testing the air for smells with his fine enquiring nose. We don't receive much yet but sense fresh life being wafted towards us on the airwaves from the year opening ahead.

# February



The smoke of a bonfire is drifting from beyond a wall but I can't smell it. The slow smoke disperses into the air for it is a dank and dim and dripping day. A bus turning in an empty mid-day silence brought me a whiff of diesel. No windless cold seems to cut that off. Apart from that, the phlegm masking the inside of my head seemed to have encumbered the air passages outside it.

There are times up here when it isn't definitely raining but it's as if the air is weeping, drenching, silently. Maybe from the valley, if they are in daylight, we look as if wrapped in cloud but up here it doesn't feel as definite as that: just a cowl of wet dark. No smells are coming through the chill moisture, not even off wet wood and grass or slime or rot. As

I come in from the bottom of my garden, I think this is the time to be in and stay in and shut out the outside world that has shut itself off.

On top of the shoulder-height wall on either side of the path that dips down to my back gate at road level, I had put two plantlings of juniper a friend had given me in autumn. I absent-mindedly passed my hand over it, perhaps to find out if the frond felt alive. Whether they will take I don't know but parts of them are still green. The strong clean smell from my hands at once penetrated the obfuscation of my sinuses. Resinous healthy echo of friendship. Further up the path, a few grey wisps were still on my lavender plants, two cuttings I had put in either side the beginning of the cinder path that backs my vegetable patch. So I picked a bit with the unjunipered hand and the strength of the lavender smell from the grey old needles and the stalk I rubbed was unbelievable from those dowdy bits of twig – such pungence. It remains a favourite through the ages, and itself seems almost everlasting.

Removing the matted remains of Virginian stock and alyssum stems from the edge of a raised bed by my back door to see what had come through under the snow, I uncovered, fresh and viridique, a spray of crisp parsley. No need to crush this and sniff closely. The minute I picked the stem, an invigorating juicy whiff of parsley suffused the air. This bed is really for flowers, but I let parsley grow where it will, as it won't always, and I was rewarded for my 'let-live' habits by feeling more alive, as a deep breath of parsley invigorates me and clears my head as does an inhalation of mint. But I have the snow to thank for it. Fresh-cut bright green parsley on potatoes in darkest February – what luck!

By my back door is a pot with lemon thyme still fresh and green from the autumn. My house is full of lemons, part of daily diet in winter, but the aroma released from this tiny leaf hardly bigger than discs of duckweed as I crumble it on my kitchen table is none the less welcome.

The next day, after a morning as closed in as ever, something must have shifted in the upper air, for suddenly there were distances and some weight was lifted from the head. Even a gleam of sun struggled through from above the yew hedge. It shone direct on to the raised sheltered bed by my back door and as if in time to music a sickly white stem of a crocus became a delicate flower lined with lilac. It would have a faint smell, I thought. Crocuses are among our most fragrant flowers. These are early species crocuses, white outer sheath and pale purple inside when open. I dipped my nose as near to the deeply orange stamens as I could and practically staggered back with the scent of honey in my head. The sky drew over, the day closed, the flower shut and disappeared from sight and scent, but there it is, and there they all are, crowding out of the ground, the early crocuses; and the slightest indication from the sun will expand them on to the air.

Only now at the end of February is the month living up to its reputation for filling the ditches. The steady drench all day is just what will bring on the daffodil shoots that seem to double their height daily.

Having bought my Sturon onion sets and some maincrop *Desirée* potato seed in the pouring rain (Arran Pilot, which I like to put in as a second early, are not so easy to find; they are promised for 'next week'), I went into my loft, which gets plenty of light, to spread out my purchases. I traced at last the sweetish 'quite pleasant smell' visitors had detected up there at Christmas. After dismissing the possibility that it might be visitors' socks, or a Christmas cake which I'd kept up there, and having sorted out a bag of rather strong-smelling potatoes (not mine but bought from a farm in wet December) I had decided it was nothing that needed pursuing. It was not the smell of rotting plaster or dry rot or the forgotten remnants of a midnight feast. But now I found a box of apples collected from a friend's garden in autumn, none rotting, reminding me that if I have time there are still enough left to make some

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more apple ginger jam. The smell of jam-making had percolated the whole house when I made some before Christmas. Now added to the air in the loft above the more earthy smell of the seed potatoes is the duct-clearing odour of onions.

This is a good time, if you can't get on with anything else, to look in boxes and bags where you've put produce, roots, bulbs or corms and see what's happening to them. I found five hyacinths, each with a tough triangle of light green, on a shelf in my shed, put on one side for something I'd neglected to do in the autumn. I quickly shoved them into a strip of earth by the path where later they will, I hope, perfume the air to maximum benefit and halt me on my way to some job further down the garden. With the protecting moist, drinking earth at last round their shrivelled papery dried out skins I felt less dry and shrivelled myself.

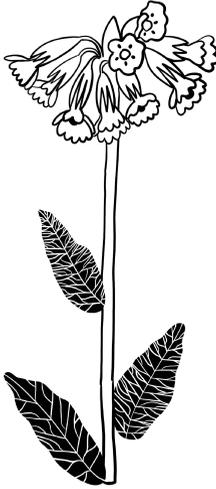
Early next morning the roads, paths, air were still suffused with damp but as a gleam of sun flickered through, the sky suddenly lifted. I went out to see what a pale streak was, in the bed by the back door, seen through the steam of the bathroom window. Some tiny cream crocuses that I had forgotten I'd put in had come through and a few yellow ones were emerging too but they, like everyone but the early birds, knew it was too soon in the day to open yet and they don't release their smell when shut. The air smelt freshly with the damp but with that invigorating feel when it is drying up, not the sense of clammy shut-in blotting out when it's going to shroud everything all day.

Later, when the light was stronger, the clump of lavender-coloured species crocus sprang open like a chorus exactly on cue. They opened their star shapes all at once for me to bury my face in their cool delicacy and inhale their honey; to get the benefit of the snowdrops I still have to bend down to them and turn them up for me to sniff close – worth it every time – although I'm sure their fragrance is being released into the air just above ground level for the insects. One would need to be a

Lilliputian, or a Tom Thumb, and lie on one's back under their delicate canopies, as we might under a lilac tree, but that is far ahead yet.

What is here and very much now, though, is one of the best smells of the year – sarcococca; sarcococca that keeps its glossy green leaves all the year. We have waited impatiently looking at those buds so full of promise since early January for their prolific sweet fragrance to perfume the air. Two people I know with sarcococcae have planted them either side of the entrance to their house. Someone coming up to such a door with bad intent might be more turned from it by the sarcococca's perfume than by notices of burglar alarms, and anyone leaving the house must feel accompanied by good will. Another bush whose delicious scent is released this month flowers on its bare stem. There is no gradual cladding and bulking out of the plant with leaves, but sudden glory from nakedness: the earliest of the daphnes – *Daphne mezereum*.

# March



March is certainly coming in like a lion – a roaring beast up here. After the gale had torn wider and wider the covering to the sky to let the blue in, it was a bright sunny enticing outside world. Dry, perfect for getting on with all the jobs I'm in the middle of, digging a trench for peas, smelling the ground, clearing, burning, some sowing at last, too, perhaps; and would not all this movement in the air carry perfumes?

Not a bit of it. I don't even get fully out of the back door when I am back in like a shot. I am obviously the creature the lion is after. It is a killing wind, not the 'gentle gales' of the songs, wings laden with balm. This ill wind does me no good. It brings ailments, and probably illness. I will not be able to do a thing.