

# ASCENT OF AROMA

**Jane Perrone** explores the sweet-smelling world of perfumed leaves

ILLUSTRATIONS HELEN CAMPBELL

If you open up a book on herbs to read about bergamot (*Monarda didyma*), you'll invariably read that oswego tea – as the brew made from this herb is known – was the replacement for 'English' tea in the wake of the Boston Tea party of 1773, when American colonists destroyed the tea cargo of three ships in protest at British taxation hikes.

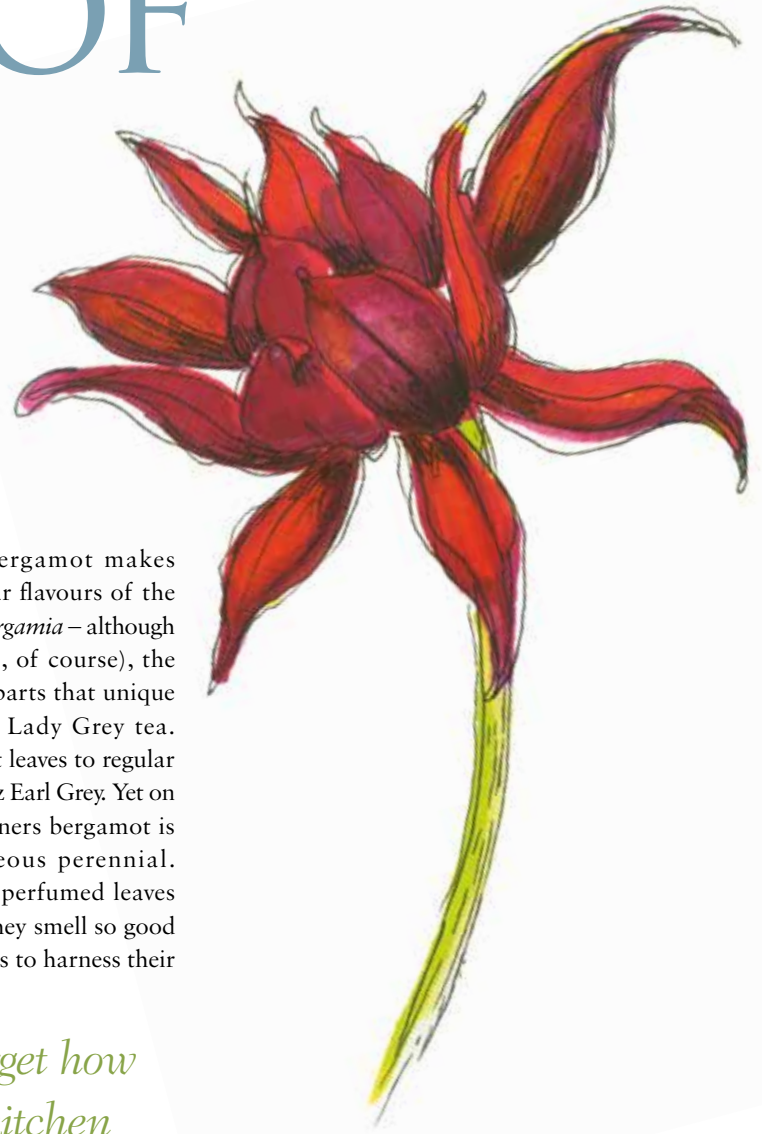
It's true that oswego tea was drunk by the colonists – a trick they no doubt learned from native Americans – but it wasn't the only plant pressed into service. As James M Volo writes in his book *The Boston Tea Party: The*

The common name bergamot makes a connection to the similar flavours of the bergamot orange (*Citrus bergamia* – although it's no relation to the tree, of course), the citrus fruit whose skin imparts that unique flavour to Earl Grey and Lady Grey tea. And you can add bergamot leaves to regular tea to create your own ersatz Earl Grey. Yet on the whole, for most gardeners bergamot is simply a pretty herbaceous perennial. This seems true of many perfumed leaves common to our gardens: they smell so good that we forget how easy it is to harness their aromas in the kitchen. →

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*Foundations of Revolution*: 'The matrons of each town made a great spectacle of brewing alternative beverages from native leaves, stems, seeds and flowers'. Their tea substitutes included Labrador tea made from *Rhododendron groenlandicum*, and liberty tea made from whorled loosestrife (*Lysimachia quadrifolia*). Some people even tried (and generally failed) at growing *Camellia sinensis* in their gardens.

Yet bergamot won out in the end, at least in terms of tea alternatives. This member of the mint family with its showy red or pink flowers is the plant we continue to grow as an ornamental in our gardens on both sides of the Atlantic: some of us still put the leaves to work in the teapot. Forager and garden writer Alys Fowler calls it 'a sort of Earl Grey of the herbal tea world'.



## PELARGONIUM GROWING TIPS

**Expert advice from Ursula Key-Davis of pelargonium specialists Fibrex Nurseries of Pebworth, near Stratford-upon-Avon**

**Varieties** 'I particularly like *Pelargonium* 'Radula'. The leaves are very deeply cut, the scent is lemon-rose, and it makes the most handsome, huge plant.'

**Soil** 'Any fresh, good quality compost is fine - they are not particularly picky.'

**Position** 'Take them inside around September, cut plants back by half, clean the plant up and replot it into a fresh pot with fresh compost, and it will grow quite happily away in the winter and make an attractive foliage plant. Pelargoniums are light-loving plants, so put them in a nice sunny position. Traditionally, put them back outside in full sun in the third week of May. By that time, they should be back in flower. Once they have finished flowering, they are easy to take cuttings from.'

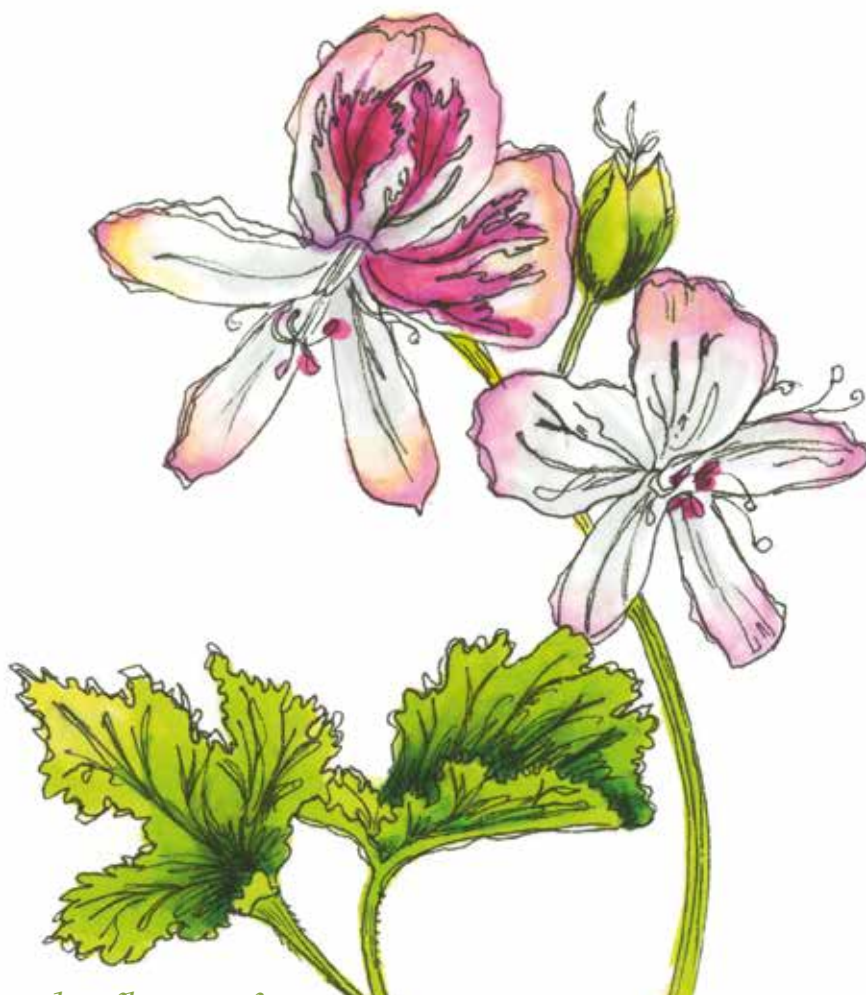
A pelargonium will exist with neglect, but it thrives if you look after it. Give a high potash feed about once a week or 10 days, and they respond very well.'

**Harvesting** 'As long as you replot them in September, they will start growing again, and you can use the odd leaf during winter. I use them in cakes. I put the leaves in the bottom of a sandwich tin, pour the Victoria sponge mixture on top, and bake the cake. The oils from the leaves cook out into the cake; if you use 'Radula' it puts the flavour of Turkish delight into the cake.'

→ I'm a sucker for an unusual plant, and as soon as I read a description of the cola plant (*Artemisia abrotanum* var. *maritima*) from the Manor Farm Herb nursery in Oxfordshire, I knew I'd be planting one before long. The silvery, feathery foliage grew so well in my quick-draining raised herb bed, and the aroma from the leaves as I brushed past while weeding was so delicious – it *does* smell like cola! – that for a while I forgot to pick some to take to the kitchen. I eventually added some to a pot-roasted pork shoulder, which gave a nice kick, and a few sprigs muddled into a glass of fizzy water taste good too.

If you don't want to go to the bother of getting hold of this rather obscure member of the artemisia family, what about the lavender that inhabits almost every garden? You may pick and dry the flowers for scented cushions, but the leaves are just as useful. Some cooks add the dried leaves to their *herbes de Provence* mix, and it's a feature of the *ras el hanout* spice mix of North Africa. The chopped leaves can be added to home-made

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### RECIPE: ROSE-GERANIUM AND LEMON CORDIAL

**Gardener, writer and TV presenter Sarah Raven grows *Pelargonium* 'Attar of Roses' and 'Sweet Mimosa' especially for this recipe, and for adding to blackberry and apple pies and crumble. Add citric acid if you want to store this for more than three or four days in the fridge. This recipe comes from [www.sarahraven.com](http://www.sarahraven.com) – a supplier of plants, bulbs and seeds for flowers, fruit and veg.**

**Makes 2 litres**

**Ingredients**

- 2kg caster sugar
- 1 litre water
- Handful rose-scented pelargonium leaves
- The juice of 6-8 lemons (depending on whether tartaric acid is used)
- Finely grated zest of 2 lemons
- 30g citric (or tartaric) acid (optional)

**Method**

- Heat the sugar, water and pelargonium leaves until the sugar is dissolved. Cool.
- Remove the geranium leaves and add the citric acid (if using), juice and zest.
- Dilute to taste with sparkling water.



lemonade, and if you have an ice cream maker you can experiment by infusing cream with lavender leaves for a subtly perfumed dessert.

The granddaddy of this group, though, must be scented leaf pelargoniums. The flowers, though generally pretty enough, play second fiddle to the softly furry leaves. There's an array of scents to choose from, including the citrus of 'Cy's Sunburst', the cedar-scented 'Clorinda' and the piney 'Variegated Fragrans'. Perhaps the best known and loved are the rose petal scented types, such as 'Attar of Roses'.

Scented leaf pelargoniums arrived in the US only a few years after the Boston Tea Party, and soon became established as a useful plant for the house and garden. The Victorians fell for scented leaf pelargoniums in a big way, breeding ever more unusual varieties, but by the early 20th century they began to lose ground to the brasher charms of the zonal pelargonium in our gardens. Their fortunes revived as gardeners rediscovered their charms.

Layer a few leaves in a jar packed with sugar for up to a month, then remove before using the sugar in baking. You can also use them to flavour jams and jellies, and even make a liqueur with vodka and sugar. ♦