



# The Scented Path

Turn garden walks into an exhilarating sensory experience by growing herbs and other fragrant plants along the way.

BY BRANDEE GRUENER

**W**ANDERING THE sun-soaked paths of a California winery garden years ago, I was struck by the way sages and thymes were growing in the stone stairs, spilling directly into my path. As I stepped over the herbs on my way down into the lower garden, they released a medley of fragrance underfoot that smelled warm and delicious.

It was clear the herbs were intentionally planted in the pathway to produce this en-

veloping sensory experience. That garden, located in Northern California's Russian River Valley, was the site of VML Vineyards at the time, and its gardener was Lori Behrens, who has fond memories of the scented stairways and "aroma gardens" she installed there. While many wineries hold tastings pairing food with their vintages, VML also encouraged tasters to sniff chocolate cosmos and other fragrant plants in the courtyard to enhance the flavors of the wines.

According to Behrens, the winery's original hardscape was installed by plantsman and Digging Dog Nursery owner Gary Ratway, who is known for growing plants in crevices, nooks, and crannies much like they do in nature along the California coast. Conveniently for Behrens, the rammed earth construction for the stairs included eight-inch gaps behind each tread that allowed for planting and running soaker hoses to keep plants watered.

**The scented stairway at the former VML Vineyards garden in Northern California featured fragrant herbs such as sage and thyme.**

A short, creeping mint with tiny leaves and a big aroma, Corsican mint fills the spaces between the flagstones in this walkway.

“The idea was to have low-growing plants that would spark the eye and the nose,” says Behrens. She planted the center of the stairways with short, mat-forming selections of thyme and added various sages at the edges where there was less foot traffic, but their leaves would still release a heady scent when brushed. The rest of the garden was full of scented plants such as rosemary, basil, lemon verbena, roses, and sweet peas. “We wanted to invite people to go into the garden and have an experience they’d never had before,” Behrens says.

My experience was so captivating that I immediately knew I had to create my own scented path when I returned home to my garden in North Carolina.

### MY OWN SCENTED PATH

Of course, my garden lacked the winery’s stairs, space, or Mediterranean climate, but my goal was to create a similar experience. I had already planned to use bricks to pave over a well-worn path in the lawn where I made frequent trips to the flower beds with a watering can. All I needed to do was modify the plan a bit by leaving spaces in the brick pattern for planting fragrant, low-growing herbs. Blurring the boundary between garden bed and



Creeping varieties of thyme and rosemary grow from openings in the brick path in the author’s North Carolina garden.



path allowed me to expand my garden space and tuck in a few plants that could handle the dry, sandy soil.

I laid bricks into a base of sand in a series of square patterns, where four bricks are arranged at 90 degrees to each other, leaving a half-brick space of about three-by-three inches in the center. Because the underlying sandy soil in my sunny garden is very porous, I dug out most of the sand in each opening of the bricks and mixed in a rich garden soil before planting a variety of thymes, prostrate rosemary, Corsican mint (*Mentha requienii*), and chamomile. Even with the added soil, though, the end result was still a sharply draining planting medium. Despite daily watering, the Corsican mint quickly dried out in my USDA Zone 7b garden during a hot summer. The chamomile lasted a brief season and never returned. But the thymes and rosemary thrived, yielding their wonderful aroma each time I venture to the flower beds with the watering can.

### TIPS FOR YOUR OWN PATH

You can easily incorporate a scented path

in your own garden. If you want to install a new brick walkway, you can use any type of brick pattern; all you have to do is leave out some bricks to create pockets for planting. If you don’t want to use bricks, flagstones, with their irregular shapes, naturally leave gaps in between for planting. There are also pavers made of concrete that come in various shapes, some with built-in openings.

Another option is simply digging out small areas in a gravel path to plunk in your plants. This looks most effective if plants are sited around focal points like large stones, pots, or benches to visually ground them.

If you have a set of stairs in the garden, they likely do not include a gap behind the treads for planting. Instead, plant creeping herbs or flowers next to the treads where they can spill over into the stairway, softening its edges. Potted plants set at the edges of the steps would also work as long as they aren’t a tripping hazard.

### CHOOSING GROUNDCOVER PLANTS

For filling the spaces between bricks, flagstones, or pavers in your path, there are



**Above:** Both the flowers and leaves of catmint (*Nepeta x faassenii*) are fragrant; the blooms also attract pollinators. Right: 'Icterina', left, and 'Berggarten Variegated', right, are two short selections of culinary sage (*Salvia officinalis*) that are strikingly ornamental.

several good options with low, spreading habits that can handle being stepped on occasionally, but thyme seems to be top of the list. With at least five species of culinary value and an estimated 350 varieties, there's a lot to choose from. Specialty nurseries like Mountain Valley Growers have introduced creatively named creeping thymes such as 'Annie Hall', 'Leprechaun', and 'Pink Lemonade'. Foliage can range from traditional greens to golden, blue-gray, and variegated. Flowers can be white, purple or pink. Some species are lemon- or anise-scented.

If you live in a region with a Mediterranean climate, such as in northern California, thyme is a natural pick. Behrens is a fan of *Thymus serpyllum* 'Elfin', a creeping wild thyme with lilac flowers. "It is so durable and vigorous," she says. "It will almost fill in an entire spot where you plant it." For areas with less foot traffic, Behrens



recommends trying the many ornamental varieties of culinary sage (*Salvia officinalis*), such as gold-variegated 'Icterina' and the white-variegated and rose-tinged 'Tricolor', which grow 12 to 18 inches high and are fairly easy to find.

Thymes are also favorite groundcovers for kitchen garden designer and author

Ellen Ecker Ogden, who uses lemon and variegated thymes in her Vermont garden (USDA Zone 4). "There's something so lovely about having that wildness under the feet," she says. "It provides such a cozy, informal quality to the garden."

In Iowa, Kelly D. Norris, director of horticulture and education at the Greater

## SELECTED FRAGRANT GROUND-HUGGERS

Plant	Height (in.)	Characteristics	Cultural Requirements	USDA Hardiness Zones
<i>Artemisia schmidtiana</i> (silver mound)	6–12	Feathery silver foliage forms a mound; medicinal scent; deer and rabbit resistant	Full sun and poor, well-drained soil; drought-tolerant; shear before flowers appear in summer	3–7
<i>Chamaemelum nobile</i> (Roman chamomile)	3–6	Fruity scent; white daisylike flowers	Prefers full sun in cooler climates and afternoon shade in hotter areas; well-drained and not overly rich soil; drought-tolerant once established	4–9
<i>Dianthus gratianopolitanus</i> (Cheddar pink)	6–12	Grassy blue-green foliage and pink flowers with a clovelike scent	Full sun and well-drained soil; deadhead for more blooms	3–8
<i>Galium odoratum</i> (sweet woodruff)	6–12	Mat-forming, with umbrella foliage; small white flowers; a sweet hay scent	Rich, moist soil; part shade to full shade; can be aggressive	4–8
<i>Lobularia maritima</i> (sweet alyssum)	4–10	Grown as a cool-season annual with a honey fragrance; clusters of white or pale pink/lavender flowers	Full sun to part shade; well-drained soil with moderate moisture; will self-sow in mild climates, a short-lived perennial in warmest climates	10–11
<i>Mentha requienii</i> (Corsican mint)	½–1	Mat-forming, with a minty scent; neat, tiny leaves and lavender flowers	Rich, moist, well-drained soil; appreciates afternoon shade; tolerates some foot traffic	6–9
<i>Teucrium chamaedrys</i> 'Prostratum' (germander cultivar)	2–10	Creeping mound of scalloped or needle-shaped evergreen leaves topped with honey-scented pinkish or purple flowers	Full sun and lean, well-drained soil; drought resistant; winter damage can occur in colder climates	5–9
<i>Thymus</i> spp. (thyme, creeping varieties)	1–12	Scents range from savory to citrus to licorice; some varieties have blue-gray, golden, or variegated leaves; typically pink or lavender flowers	Dry, sandy soil; may require winter protection in Zone 5; prefers full sun but some will tolerate part shade	5–9
<i>Viola odorata</i> (sweet violet)	4–12	Sweet-scented spring bloomers range from violet to white, with contrasting yellow coloration on some	Moist, well-drained soil; full sun to part shade	4–9



The flowers of 'Grandiflorus' Cheddar pink (*Dianthus gratianopolitanus*), left, and sweet alyssum (*Lobularia maritima*), right, combine the delicious scents of clove and honey.

Des Moines Botanical Garden (USDA Zone 5), has found that thyme and other Mediterranean plants don't handle the Midwest's humid summers well enough to be useful. Instead, he recommends *Teucrium chamaedrys* 'Prostratum', a six-inch-high creeping germander. The honey-scented mounds sport masses of small, pinkish flowers in late spring and summer and are, Norris says, "resilient to some amount of disturbance."

Landscape designer Jane Berger says that thyme is a popular groundcover that does just fine in gardens around her home in Washington, D.C. (USDA Zone 7). She also recommends Cheddar pinks (*Dianthus gratianopolitanus*), a tough groundcover hardy from Zones 3 to 8 that can thrive in both the Midwest and the Southeast. The grasslike, blue-green foliage grows from six to 12 inches high, bearing clove-scented pink flowers in spring, and—with the

help of deadheading—into the summer. She also favors the delicately sweet scent of several *Viola* species, including sweet violets (*V. odorata*), for a low-traffic groundcover in part shade.

For more information about some of these plants and additional groundcovering choices, see the chart on page 17.

### FRAGRANT PLANTS FOR EDGING PATHS

If you choose to simply edge your path with fragrant plants, you have many more choices. Here are a few of our experts' favorites to get you started.

Behrens says that Mediterranean plants like rosemary and lavender are too vigorous

garden, Ogden plants anew each year an assortment of basil (*Ocimum* spp.), lovage (*Levisticum officinale*), salad burnet (*Sanguisorba minor*), costmary (*Tanacetum balsamita*), pennyroyal (*Mentha pulegium*), and fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare*).

Norris recommends anise hyssop (*Agastache foeniculum*) along pathways. This native of the upper Midwest and Great Plains has licorice-scented foliage and purple spikes of flowers that attract hummingbirds and butterflies. Norris also suggests trying mountain mints (*Pycnanthemum* spp.), though he cautions they can be somewhat aggressive given ideal conditions because they spread via rhizomes.

She also suggests trying some of the readily available dwarf selections of scented shrubs like lilacs (*Syringa* spp.), butterfly bushes (*Buddleia* spp.), glossy abelia (*Abelia × grandiflora*), sweetspire (*Itea virginica*), and summersweet (*Clethra alnifolia*). “Both sweetspire and summersweet will perfume the entire garden once you get them going,” Berger says. And don’t forget that sweet fern (*Comptonia peregrina*), a fernlike shrub that is actually a member of the bayberry family, and hay-scented fern (*Dennstaedtia punctilobula*) can add the wonderful scent of freshly mown hay.

Once you’ve converted a garden space into a scented path, it’s easy to start visual-



Left: Native to the Midwest and Great Plains, anise hyssop grows two to four feet tall and features licorice-scented leaves. Above: Lavender thrives along this well-drained gravel path.

and shrubby to plant in a path in her region but they can be planted nearby or as edging.

Ogden enjoys putting fragrant herbs alongside high-traffic areas so she can brush her hands through them on the way into her house. For 20 years, ‘Lemon Gem’ marigold (*Tagetes tenuifolia*) has been a mainstay along her pathways. This summer annual has lacy, citrus-scented foliage covered in edible yellow flowers. Because many herbs are not hardy in her

The leaves of these native plants emit a minty smell when crushed and can be used in teas. For an accent plant along the edges of paths, Norris suggests planting wild onions (*Allium* spp.), which have a mild onion scent and sport globes of clustered flowers in a variety of colors. Species native to the Midwest include nodding onion (*A. cernuum*) and prairie onion (*A. stellatum*), both with purple to lavender flowerheads.

Alongside sunnier paths, Berger recommends a newer catmint (*Nepeta × faassenii*), ‘Junior Walker’, with spikes of blue flowers that grow to just 16 inches tall.

izing every nook and cranny as a home for plants. If your garden is like mine, many of those spaces already welcome plant life that isn’t of your choosing. Why not fill them with scented plants that expand the garden space, soften hard edges, and add a touch of charm? Bring a bit of wildness underfoot and enjoy engaging *all* of your senses in the garden.

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