

Tea Olive is the Scent of Autumn

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We're having a very mild autumn in Atlanta this year, and all the glorious warm weather means that my tea olive has been in bloom, more or less non-stop, since September. The creamy flowers are the main reason I grow this shrub, which is also known as sweet olive, or *Osmanthus fragrans* for those who prefer Latin binomials.



(Photo: H. Brucker)

These tiny blossoms are intoxicating not for their beauty – in fact, you hardly notice them hidden among the foliage – but for their scent. The perfume absolutely infiltrates the air in fall, and sporadically throughout the winter whenever there's a warm spell.

The scent of tea olive is hard to describe – nothing else smells like this, that I can think of. It's fresh and light, not sweet like roses or headily pungent like jasmine. Not musky. Not fruity. A little bit spicy, but not sharply so. It's just a clean, happy smell. And I've come to think of it as a Southern smell as well, because the scents of autumn didn't include anything like this when I lived on the Great Lakes. (It was all crisp, timbered smells up there – dry leaves, spruce needles, and wood smoke.)

Tea olive is a bulky, evergreen shrub that can reach 25 feet in height and half that much in girth, so in general you have to choose a site for it carefully.

Mine is growing in a pot, and it probably gets less light than it would like, so it's a bit more restrained in size. I've pruned it into a tree shape, which is easy enough to do, even if you're growing tea olive in the ground. As you can see, I keep it very close to my front door, and it makes all my comings and goings just a little bit sweeter. It would be a shame to plant tea olive in a place where you didn't pass by often.



(Photo: H. Brucker)

Tea olive and its cousins are widely grown and much loved in China, where the flowers are harvested and used in tea (similar to jasmine), as well as in perfume. Since they're so tiny, it takes many kilos to produce a small amount of fragrance, making osmanthus oil an expensive and precious ingredient in the perfumes that contain it. Several years ago in China, a series of postage stamps depicted four different *Osmanthus* species, including some yellow- and orange-flowered varieties.



Here in the U.S., tea olive is hardy in zones 7 to 9. It seems to be very common in the coastal South, especially in the gardens of like Savannah and Charleston, which is where I first discovered it, but I'd love to hear from gardeners in other parts of the country who grow tea olive or any of the other *Osmanthus* shrubs.

