

how to spend it

A heady and refined scent for winter

Gardenia's temperamental, sweet and sultry nature utterly seduces a guest perfume blogger



NOVEMBER 30 2012
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Gardenia is a flower with diverse connotations, from sultry to innocent. The jazz singer Billie Holiday famously tucked a white gardenia in her hair; 19th Shanghai courtesans used its seeds to colour their undergarments a vibrant yellow; and in the Victorian language of flowers, gardenia symbolised purity and refinement. Its scent is heady and lush, marrying the seductive warmth of jasmine with the sweetness of peach and coconut. A single blossom is enough to perfume a room for hours with a fragrance that reminds me of a summer evening. But with winter approaching, it will be months before I can find fresh gardenias, and instead I look for them in a perfume bottle.

This task is challenging because gardenia, temperamental flower that she is, does not give up her essence to any distillation methods. While rose, jasmine or tuberose oils can be extracted from petals, the aroma of gardenia is recreated by hand. As such, it becomes a fantasy scent interpreted by each perfumer differently, with some treating gardenia as a sunlit étude and others envisioning it as a baroque painting. One of my favourite bright and sparkling gardenias is Annick Goutal's Un Matin d'Orange (far left in picture, £79 for 100ml), a gauzy blend featuring frangipani and smelling like rain-soaked petals. A similar romantic impression is conveyed by Marc Jacobs's Woman (far right in picture, £75 for 100ml), the first perfume launched by the American fashion designer.

An intriguing new fragrance by Arquiste Parfumeur, Boutonnière No.7 (centre left in picture, £125 for 55ml), offers a masculine rendition of gardenia. In a memorable juxtaposition, it combines the luscious softness of the white petals with bracing herbs and damp woods. The perfume is as perfect for a man who wants to try something different as for a woman who prefers her flowers less sweet and heady. It is polished, elegant and full of interesting twists of green lavender, salty vetiver and tender gardenia petals.

Whenever I'm in the mood for something darker and more smouldering, the gardenia I dab on my skin is the very one inspired by Billie Holiday. Created by Serge Lutens and Christopher Sheldrake in tribute to this tragic and talented artist, Une Voix Noire (centre right in picture, €130 for 75ml) smells like a blossom that spent most of its life on someone's corsage. The gardenia is laced with tobacco and woods, and in contrast to light and fresh renditions such as Un Matin d'Orange and Woman, Lutens's flower is caramelised and honeyed. It wears like a soft cashmere wrap, and feels decadent and mellow at once. "I looked for every loveliness; it all came true," I want to repeat after Holiday.

Victoria Frolova has been writing her perfume blog, boisdejasmin.com, since 2005. It began as a hobby – her interest in perfume had been kindled while growing up in a family of chemical engineers – but it quickly turned into a full-time undertaking. Since receiving professional perfumery training, she has been working as a fragrance consultant and researcher.