

Meet the Flower Sommelier Who Wants You to Stop and Smell the Roses

For flower sommelier Christopher Sheridan, a garden is about so much more than just looking pretty.

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By [Erica Browne Grivas](#) Published on October 27, 2026

Award-winning lifestyle journalist Erica Browne Grivas explores design, nature, travel, and wellness, seeking to help both humans and the planet be happier and healthier. She has been writing - and gardening - for over 30 years.



Credit: Rinne Allen

Key Points:

To reconnect with scent and senses, Sheridan suggests exploring heirloom flowers and cottage gardens.

Commercial breeding has diminished floral scent; engage with flowers through arranging, gardening, and sensory exploration.

Sheridan promotes immersive experiences like dusk garden walks and creating “cocktail and coffee gardens.”

When people encounter a beautiful flower, what's the first thing they tend to do? "Everyone, when you see a flower, you get your nose in the bloom," says Christopher Barrett Sheridan, a former public interest lawyer who fell in love with flowers nose-first.

Our relationship with scent is primal and instinctive, and one we almost forgot. In a world increasingly mediated by screens, spending time with flowers fosters attention, curiosity, and a willingness to enjoy something fleeting. For Sheridan, reconnecting with our senses is the place to start.

He calls himself the Flower Sommelier, a title drawn from his years writing tasting notes in a wine shop. Just as a [sommelier](#) trains a palate, Sheridan trains gardeners to notice and describe what they see, touch, and especially smell. Scent, he says, is "where we all need the most work."

At Longwood Gardens, where he has taught since 2024, and at venues such as the Philadelphia Flower Show, he makes the case that we've lost track of fragrance, that the [old-fashioned cottage gardens](#) of our grandparents are worth reviving, and that the richest way to enjoy flowers is to grow, arrange, and live with them.

Meet the Expert

[Christopher Barrett Sheridan](#), aka The Flower Sommelier, is a gardening writer, researcher, educator, and photographer.

Why Scent Faded

For decades, [commercial breeding has prioritized traits such as flower size](#) and stem length, sometimes at the expense of fragrance, Sheridan notes. That may help explain why supermarket roses rarely exhibit the scent of your grandparents' roses.

"Nobody set out to lose the scent," he says. "It just was just kind of an inherent trade-off that when you gain something in genetics, you have to give something up somewhere else."

Meanwhile, he argues, much of our [everyday experience of scent](#) now comes from commercial products used in the home, rather than flowers or herbs.

Scent is famously fickle and hard to define. It wafts about with an apparent will of its own, varying across the day and with temperature and weather, to say nothing of genetics. It can be wildly erratic even on a single plant, and from nose to nose.

So, not the easiest niche to pin down, and neither are Sheridan's many interests. Sheridan, a collector, says there have only been about 60 books describing scented flowers since approximately 1840. Yet, the lure of intoxicating scents, he says, is "genetically wired."

Scent is inextricably linked to memory, one of the most powerful portals we have to our past.

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That pull of memory may help explain the growing appeal of [heirloom flowers](#) and the informal [cottage-style gardens](#) we associate with them.

Sheridan believes people are seeking the authentic over the artificial and leaning into some “positive nostalgia” for the relaxed abundance of their grandparents’ gardens, or a first visit to a public garden. Heirloom plants are themselves a curated art form, through saving seeds over the centuries that link us to history as well. “We can [grow the same plants](#) [George Washington](#) and Thomas Jefferson did,” he says.

“I think formality can be stressful,” he says. “There were very few straight lines in the world until a century or two ago. So, I think that we like naturalistic things. We like scent. We like seeing insects. We like movement in the garden...Also ephemerality. Cottage gardens, they emerge, they peak, and they tend to die at the end of the season at least in temperate climates. It’s not the same place twice. That resonates with people.”

Finding Meaning in Flowers

Scent is only one of the ways we connect with flowers. Their colors and shapes speak a design language, layered with multiple cultural, personal, and historical meanings.

Sheridan explores the meanings expressed in bouquets; the most well-known system is Victorian England’s “[language of flowers](#),” but he notes every culture’s is “of equal dignity.”

“I think flowers are inherently multicultural,” he says, but to make your intent clear, he suggests writing a card explaining the meaning of the flowers.

For deeper insight into Victorian bouquets, he recommends *Tussie-Mussies: The Victorian Art of Expressing Yourself in the Language of Flowers* by Geraldine Adamich Laufer and Teresa Sabanyanka’s *The Posy Book*.

Other forms of floral expression include making a pot-et-fleur, a Victorian container of living, often tropical, plants with tubes holding cut flowers. Chanticleer Garden in Wayne, Pennsylvania, is known for its evolving display of floating floral bowls. Sheridan's twist: include pin frogs for an ikebana-style stem that brings its fragrance to nose level.



Credit: Rinne Allen

Engaging All Your Senses with Flowers

Sheridan's invitation to engage with flowers extends beyond arranging them on the table. He also wants us to get outside, preferably after dark, to experience the world of fragrance and life of the nocturnal garden. He often builds evening Longwood lectures around two dusk garden walks to appreciate the changing light, our impression of color, and our increased awareness of scent, as well as the universe of nighttime pollinators and wildlife.

Since many of us may only get into the garden before and after work, he recommends creating a "cocktail and coffee garden" planted to glow in lower light. Some favorite plants: [flowering tobacco](#), [jasmine](#), [silver-foliaged plants](#), [lavender](#), Mahonia, wintersweet, as well as [magnolias](#) and roses with low-saturation colors.

The point, Sheridan suggests, is to engage with flowers rather than simply admire them. A few ways to start:

Visit public gardens for inspiration.

Practice your own arrangements.

Float a bowl of seasonal blooms.

Take a class in [flower arranging](#) or wreath-making.

Sketch flowers or keep a [photographic journal](#) of the same natural spaces at different times of day and seasons.

Sheridan says arranging is “probably the most accessible artistic outlet we have” and encourages us to be creators rather than spectators. The beauty you create becomes “a gift to yourself and a gift to others,” he says.

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