

The Scents of the Holidays

Humans have the ability to distinguish among thousands of unique scents, and they can trigger instinctive reactions — behaviors or emotions that are initiated on a subconscious level. Odors can act as warning signals — think about the smell of fire, or gas. Or they can evoke warm, cozy thoughts of drinking hot chocolate on a cold winter morning.

The winter holidays are especially filled with memorable scents. Some traditions date back hundreds of years, and in some cases the motives were both practical and aesthetic.

An Historical Perspective

Imagine the dark, cold days of winter without the modern conveniences of electricity and indoor plumbing. People relied on candles for light and fireplaces for warmth. Water was pumped by hand from wells and then heated for bathing, a time-consuming ordeal that meant that baths were few and far between. Imagine what life was like for large families in small houses when cold weather hit and folks stayed indoors inside most of the time? Perfumes might have masked some of the “fragrance” of unwashed bodies, but these were likely affordable only to the wealthy. How did people cope, and look to the promise of spring?

Boughs cut from evergreens and brought indoors provided some relief, bringing a fresh fragrance to stuffy air — and for those living near woodlands evergreens were free for the cutting.

A precursor to scented candles and air fresheners, greens such as rosemary would be placed on the floor so that the room would fill with a pleasant aroma with every step.

In addition to greens, some more exotic spices and scents became associated with winter holidays. What scents come to mind for you? Here are a few popular ones.

Anise

With its distinctive aroma and flavor, anise seeds (either whole or ground) are commonly added to the dough or batter for baked goods, including breads and sweets. They can also be used to flavor hot chocolate and tea. Licorice, fennel, and star anise share a similar aroma and flavor.

Anise (*Pimpinella anisum*), sometimes called aniseed, is an annual flowering plant native to the Mediterranean and southwest Asia. It grows about 3' high and somewhat resembles dill, with large, umbrella-shaped seed heads. It's an easy plant to add to your herb garden.



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Unrelated to anise, star anise is the seedpod from an evergreen tree, *Illicium verum*. Native to China, it has a decorative, eight-pointed star shape. Inside each point of the star is an edible seed. Star anise is a lovely addition to potpourri.

Cinnamon



A staple in nearly every kitchen, cinnamon is used to flavor huge range of dishes, from morning oatmeal to snickerdoodle cookies to curry and meat dishes. It has an intoxicating aroma that promises good things to come from the kitchen!

Cinnamon is the inner bark of several tree species from the genus *Cinnamomum*, tropical evergreen trees native to India, Indonesia, and China. Once the outer bark is removed, the inner bark is pried off in strips that curl into long rolls as they dry. The rolls can be used as stirrers for hot chocolate

or coffee, or ground into fine powder for cooking and baking.

Cloves

With a strong and distinctive flavor and aroma, a pinch of ground cloves goes a long way. But it's an essential component of pumpkin pie spice mixes, as well as other sweets, curries, and meat dishes.

Cloves are the flower buds of an evergreen tree in the myrtle family named *Syzygium aromaticum*. Native to Indonesia, the trees grow up to 40' tall and produce clusters of red flowers. Cloves are harvested with the flower buds are about $\frac{3}{4}$ " long.

A fun family project is making pomanders by poking holes in the rinds of oranges and inserting cloves into the holes. Hang them with ribbons and enjoy the orange-clove aroma. A freshly made pomander also makes a sweet gift.



Nutmeg

What would eggnog be without a sprinkling of nutmeg on top (or mixed throughout)? Often relegated to this single use, or perhaps as a signature flavor in bechamel sauce, nutmeg has more to offer to culinary adventurers. It takes just a pinch of nutmeg to liven up egg dishes, stews, and baked goods.

Nutmeg is the seed of *Myristica fragrans*, an evergreen tree native to Indonesia. Each 1" long, egg-shaped seed has a reddish covering, called the aril. This covering is used to make the spice called mace, which has a slightly milder flavor than nutmeg. It takes about seven years for a newly planted tree to reach harvest stage, and they reach full production after 20 years.

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Peppermint

Ah, what would the holidays be without the sweet taste and smell of peppermint candy canes? Peppermint is the most common of the 25 species of mint and is among the oldest herbs used for culinary and medicinal purposes.

Distinctive not only for their intoxicating flavors and scents, mint-family plants can be identified by their stems, which are square in cross section. Mints are easy to grow — too easy, sometimes. Most mints are vigorous growers, and in conditions they enjoy (moist, rich soil and full sun) they'll spread quickly to take over a garden. Plant them in containers to keep them in bounds.



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