

# Academy Garden Club Thymes

A NEWSLETTER FOR THE MEMBERS OF THE ACADEMY GARDEN CLUB OF LENOX

MARCH 2026

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## Horticultural Column

### Potpourri

By Harriet Wetstone

The weather has been so up and down from freezing cold to balmy, from snow and sleet to sunshine, it has driven us all nuts. But my treasured patch of deep purple crocuses is up, and the daffs are just pushing up. It's time to think about planting! There are so many categories to think about; natives, pollinator friendly, scented, summer color, fall color. Today I am going to suggest we plant ahead thinking about potpourri - which will in fact be one of our fall projects.

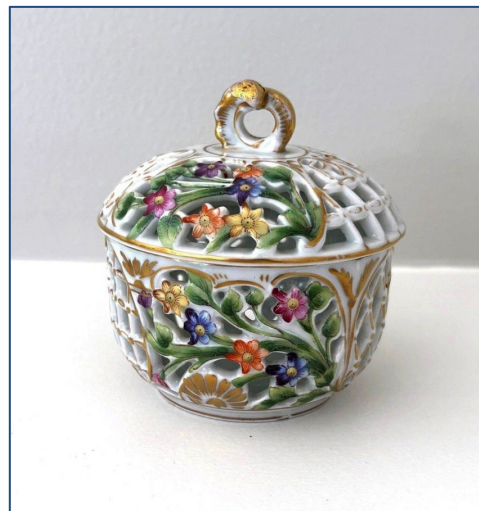
What used to come to my mind with the word potpourri was the faded pink silk heart with the very faintest scent of rose petals I found in the back of my grandma's handkerchief drawer. But no, that was a sachet.



The definition of potpourri is a mixture of dried, naturally fragrant plant materials used to provide a gentle natural scent. Potpourri has been used since ancient times both as a means of presenting fragrance, and as a means of covering up unpleasant odors.

According to Wikipedia, in early 17th century France, fresh herbs and flowers were gathered, beginning in spring and right through the summer. This collection of herbs and flowers were left out for a day or two, until they were limp, and then layered with sea salt. More layers were added including not just plant material but spices as well. Finally powdered orris root was added for additional scent and as a fixative for scent. Most informally, potpourri was scattered on the floor.

The other end of the spectrum was the whole art form of elaborate porcelain potpourri bowls with special perforated lids.



Powdered Orris root is interesting. It is the ground up rhizome of three different iris: iris Germanic or bearded iris, iris pallid native to Croatia and Iris Florentina, which is found in the area around Florence Italy. The Iris Florentina grows wild in Italy and is the one most used for orris root.

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The fresh rhizome, the fleshy root of the iris, has no scent. It needs to be dried for at least two and as long as five years before it begins to develop its sweet scent, said to be a characteristic violet scent.

Orris root has been used since the time of the Egyptian pharaohs. It was used in snuff and chewed to cover bad breath. It is still used in the making of perfume, to flavor gin, and most commonly nowadays, as a fixative. A fixative is a stabilizing or preservative agent. Orris root, or other fixatives prolong the longevity of essential oils which are responsible for scent.



The list of plant materials typically used for potpourri includes anything with a strong and pleasant scent. In today's world, potpourri is most often presented in open glass jars or bowls, so one thinks in terms of color and texture as well as scent. Another type of potpourri presentation is organza bags tied with ribbon which is perfect for gift giving. And because the scent of any dried leaf or flower is going to fade, scent infused oils, such as orange or jasmine or lavender are also used.

But what to plant with the idea of making potpourri? One list of the five best potpourri plants includes orange and red and gold marigolds for color, rose petals for both scent and color (although dried rose petals are only faintly scented), lavender, of course; different varieties of basil, and chamomile, both pretty and with a lovely apple like scent. Other lists include rosemary, lemon balm, pine, and cedar. Different mint, sages, and scented geraniums are also on potpourri lists.

And how best to dry all these fragrant herbs and flowers? The simplest way is to gather small bunches of flowers tied with string and to hang them upside down to dry in a warm dark place. Great, if you have an attic! A dehydrator also works well if you have one. The temperature should be about 95 degrees Fahrenheit, and it takes about two hours. Yet another method is to put silica gel (you can get it at craft stores) in the bottom of a glass jar and put petals on top and then add more gel. Screw the lid on and let sit for a few days.

I don't want to think about October now, I want to think about Spring! But it will be lovely to see you all at our October Potpourri meeting!

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