

Scented Geranium Fact Sheet

Story of Scent Cell Phone Tour at The Frelinghuysen Arboretum

An Herb Society of America Fact Sheet

Pelargoniums

Scented-leafed Culinary Species

Pelargonium citronellum (syn. *P.* 'Mabel Grey') (lemon-scented geranium)

P. crispum (lemon-scented geranium)

P. graveolens (rose-scented or minty-rose-scented geranium)

P. odoratissimum (apple-scented or apple-rose-scented geranium)

P. tomentosum (peppermint-scented geranium)



Assorted *Pelargonium* leaves
Photo by Susan Belsinger

Description

Pelargoniums are a diverse group of plants with a wide variety of growth habits and habitats. Members of the family Geraniaceae, estimates of the total number of species and subspecies in the genus range from 230-300. Most are native to southern Africa, but a few species occur naturally in Australia, eastern Africa, New Zealand, the Middle East and the islands of Madagascar, St. Helena, and Tristan de Cuhna.

The genus *Pelargonium* includes annuals and herbaceous perennials, shrubs and subshrubs, and both evergreen and deciduous plants, but most of the scented-leafed species or "scenteds" are succulent perennial shrubs in their native habitats. Some grow erect while others have a trailing habit, and some have tuberous roots.

Most herb enthusiasts value pelargoniums for their fragrant leaves, but not all plants in the genus are scented, and not all of the scents are pleasant. The common name, scented geranium, came to be associated with pelargoniums due to a very early misclassification of the genus. True geraniums belong to the genus *Geranium* and are hardy North American and European plants.

Pelargoniums are informally classified as zonals (which are named for the dark markings on the leaf surface and are primarily ornamental, bedding plants), fancy-leaf cultivars (some of which are scented), regals, angels, ivy-leaf, and scented-leaf. The scented-leafed pelargoniums (often called "scented geraniums") can have aromas of rose, peppermint, lemon, lime, orange, strawberry, camphor, nutmeg, spice, apricot, apple, filbert, ginger, and coconut. Plants are often categorized by enthusiasts according to the following scent groups: citrus, fruit and nut, mint, rose, and pungent.

Pelargonium leaves come in a variety of shapes and sizes and may resemble ferns, grape leaves or oak leaves and may be deeply divided or nearly round. They may be small or large, may be covered with fine hairs and may be rough, sticky or have a velvety texture. Leaf edges may appear "curly" or "crisped" in some species. Leaves include scent glands that release pelargoniums' renowned scents when brushed, may be variegated, and may include dark patches of color in the center or along the veins.

Flowers occur in a pseudo-umbel consisting of 1-50 individual flowers, but most have 5-10 florets. Flowers may be white, pink, mauve, lavender, pale yellow or burgundy, and upper petals may have purple, pink or red markings. Most of the scented-leaf species have small, delicate blooms, but some pelargoniums have flowers that resemble tulips, carnations, cactus flowers or pansies.

Culture

Pelargoniums can be propagated from stem cuttings, root divisions, leaf cuttings or seed. Propagating from seed can be tricky for several reasons. Only true species can be cultivated successfully from seed, but due to cross-pollination and labeling errors it may be difficult to know if your seed is true. Cuttings are the preferred propagation method for many of HSA's *Pelargonium* aficionados.

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1

All pelargoniums are hardy in Zone 10, but some are hardy to Zones 7-8. All pelargoniums require well-drained soil with good air circulation. Some, like *P. graveolens*, prefer moist soil, and others, like *P. scabrum*, grow in dry, sandy areas. Soil should be slightly acid with a pH of 6.0-6.8. Sterilized potting soil amended with perlite, pigeon grit, granular baked clay, sand or greensand will provide adequate drainage.

Pelargoniums can be planted in-ground or in containers, or a combination of both. If planting in-ground, remember that due to their temperature requirements, pelargoniums are generally grown as annuals in areas of North America that experience frost. One way to get around this is to plant pelargoniums in pots sunk into the ground. Planting in sunken pots allows plants to be easily moved indoors or to the greenhouse in the fall. If you will be planting directly in the ground, spacing should be based on the size and habit of the plant. Pelargoniums are well-suited to container growing, whether in whiskey barrels, pots or hanging baskets. Clay pots are recommended because they promote water evaporation and prevent accumulation of excess moisture.

Although most pelargoniums can be grown in full sun, some species, including *P. odoratissimum*, *P. graveolens*, *P. grossularioides* and *P. tomentosum* require some shade. If there is a cardinal rule for watering pelargoniums, it is "less is more." Although some grow near streams or in areas with winter rainfall in their native lands, most plants in this genus are native to low-rainfall areas, and they dislike excess water and humidity.

Container-grown pelargoniums generally need more fertilizer than in-ground plants. *Pelargonium* cuttings can be fertilized with a balanced 20-20-20 fertilizer after they are rooted. For in-ground plants, compost and balanced organic fertilizer can be added to the soil before planting.

For indoor growing and overwintering, plants should be brought indoors before nighttime temperatures fall below 45°F. Indoor plants will require at least 4 hours of direct sunlight or growlights, and are best placed in a south facing window or greenhouse.

Uses

Pelargoniums have a wide variety of uses. Scented-leaved pelargoniums can be used to flavor jellies, cakes, butters, ice cream, iced tea and other dishes. The pelargoniums most often used in food are the rose-, lemon- and peppermint-scented species and cultivars. Commonly used lemon-scented culinary species include *P. crispum* and *P. citronellum*. Rose-scenteds include *P. graveolens* and members of the *P. 'graveolens'* cultivar group. Other species and cultivars with culinary use include the lime-scented *P. 'Lime,'* the lemon balm-scented *P. 'Lemon Balm,'* the strawberry-lemon-scented *P. 'Lady Scarborough'* and the peppermint-scented *P. tomentosum*. There are many rose and citrus-scented cultivars with culinary use including those with hints of peach, cinnamon and orange. *P. 'Rosé'/P. 'Old Fashioned Rose'* is a culinary favorite among HSA's *Pelargonium* aficionados.

Many *Pelargonium* species have a long history of medicinal use in their native Africa. The primary uses have been for intestinal problems, wounds and respiratory ailments, but *Pelargonium* species have also been used to treat fevers, kidney complaints and other conditions. Geranium (*Pelargonium*) oil is considered a relaxant in aromatherapy, and in recent years, respiratory/cold remedies made from *P. sidoides* and *P. reniforme* have been sold in Europe and the United States. Pelargoniums can also be used in crafts and cosmetics. For more information on uses, see the Uses section of *Pelargoniums: An Herb Society of America Guide*, available on The Herb Society of America website.

This fact sheet was adapted/excerpted from *Pelargoniums: An Herb Society of America Guide*. Kirtland, OH: The Herb Society of America, 2006. See the full guide for literature citations and references as well as in-depth information on *Pelargonium* chemistry, nutrition, history, folklore, cultivation, pests/diseases, pruning, harvesting, preserving, uses, recipes, species and cultivars.

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