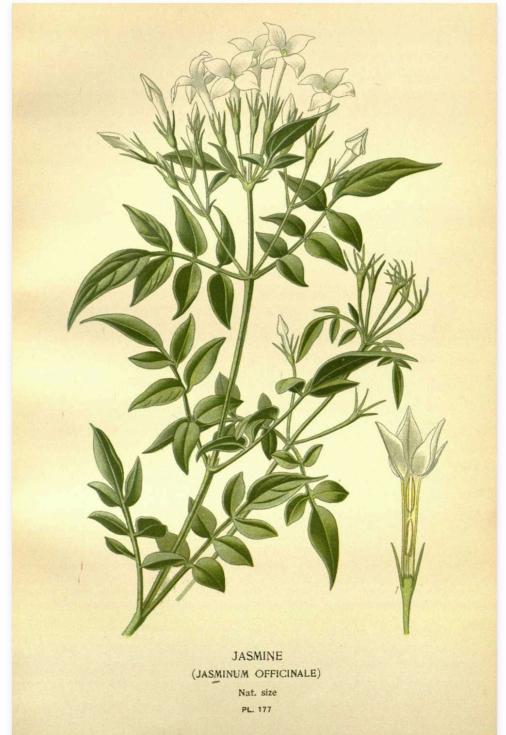


Jasmine: The Sensual and the Sacred

Adriana Ballinger and Tori Champion

Origins and Botanical History

Among the nearly two hundred species of jasmine, three varieties feature prominently in the sensory and religious histories of many cultures: common jasmine, or poet's jasmine (*Jasminum officinale*), Spanish jasmine (*Jasminum grandiflorum*), and Madurai jasmine, or Arabian jasmine (*Jasminum sambac*). People first began using jasmine in the plant's native range of [Central](#) and [South Asia](#). In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, its popularity spread from China, Persia, and India to Europe, although the method and date of its arrival in Europe "remains shrouded in mystery."¹ During its two-thousand-year history of cultivation in private gardens and harvest for scented products, jasmine has developed the power to conjure spaces and atmospheres of pleasure.² The genus name *Jasminum* originates from *yāsamin*, a Persian word for a perfume made from jasmine flowers.³ Jasmine flowers also embody significant sensory and symbolic influence in the religious practices and iconography of Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity. In the East and West, jasmine in all its varieties has been used to evoke the sensual and the sacred.



⋮ D. Bois, *Jasminum officinale*, in... []

Jasmine is a member of the Oleacea family, to which lilac, ash, and olive also belong. There is great diversity across its many varieties. Jasmine flowers can be white, yellow, and pink. The plants are native to temperate habitats and can be erect, spreading, or climbing, deciduous or evergreen. *J. officinale* is a climbing shrub which can grow up to eight meters, with flowers that blossom in late spring and early summer and small black berries that develop at the end of the season.⁴



⋮ C. T. Johansson, *Jasminum sambac*... []

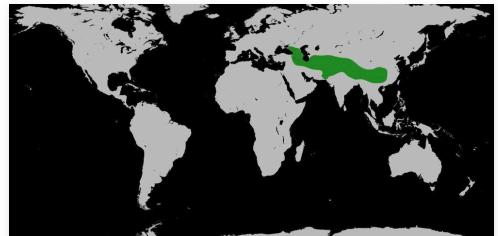


⋮ Juan Carlos Fonseca Mata, *Jasminum sambac*... []



⋮ Alexey Yakovlev, *Jasminum sambac*... []

J. officinale and *J. grandiflorum* are most often cultivated for their fragrance and have become a major ingredient in mass-produced perfumes.⁵ People have long used these species to make perfumes—albeit at smaller scales—in *J. officinale*'s native region extending from Central Asia to South China and *J. grandiflorum*'s range throughout South Asia, the Arabian Peninsula, East Africa, and South China.⁶ *Jasminum sambac* is native to South Asia and has been a significant motif in Buddhist and Hindu traditions for centuries.⁷



⋮ Wildhorse3, Distribution of *Jasminum* species... []

Jasmine has come to embody many meanings as diverse cultures have harnessed its powerful sensory qualities for personal adornment and religious practice. This plant narrative traces how the meanings that people have ascribed to jasmine have developed over time and across cultures.



⋮ Plate 2: *Jasminum officinale*,... []

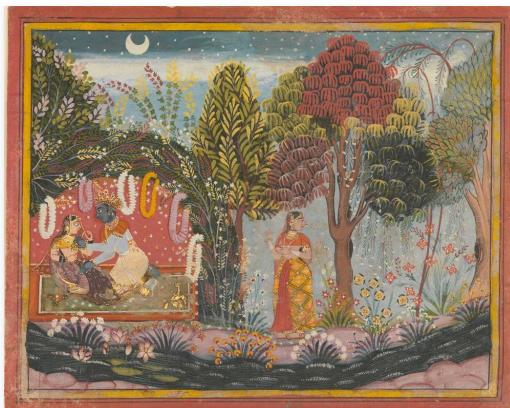
Jasmine as a Religious Motif

Religious worship is one of the most prominent contexts in which people have attached meanings to jasmine. Outside Hindu temples, merchants sell garlands strung with sweet-smelling flowers, including jasmine, marigold, roses, and spider lilies. The colorful and fragrant garlands are popular offerings in *puja*, a worship ritual demonstrating devotion to deities. During a *puja*, Hindu worshipers express their reverence by offering ritual objects such as flowers, which are "auspicious for the *puja* and the gods."⁸ The flowers must be beautiful and fragrant, as they contribute to the curation of a pleasing sensory atmosphere for both the devotees and deities. In his discussion with researcher Stine Bruland, an unnamed devotee at the Muthumari Amman Temple in La Chapelle, France, explains the sensual importance of flowers in Hindu prayer:

*Flowers are special in our religion (...) Decoration makes your mind a little happy, if you go out and see a beautiful lady or man, in good clothes, you are also happy. Your mind will be a little happy, attracted to that. The same thing attracts the people; it will encourage people to pray.*⁹

Jasmine flowers are a significant ritual item in *puja* because their vibrant sensory qualities encourage devotees to be more present in the act of praying, allowing Hindus to form a deeper tangible connection to their gods.

Jasmine also symbolizes specific Hindu deities. White jasmine represents Lord Krishna, a very popular god who is hero worshipped as the eighth incarnation of the supreme Hindu deity Lord Vishnu.¹⁰ Lord Krishna's teeth are often described as "glistening jasmine flowers" in liturgy.¹¹ As jasmine is commonly associated with sensuality, it is unsurprising that blooming jasmine flowers turn Krishna's "thoughts toward enjoying love."¹² An illustration from the *Gita Govinda*, a work by the poet Jayadeva that describes the relationship between Krishna and his consort, the goddess Radha, features jasmine. Its white flowers hang in garlands above the lovers and bloom in the surrounding vegetation of the bower.¹³



⋮ Sahibdin, Krishna, and Radha in a...

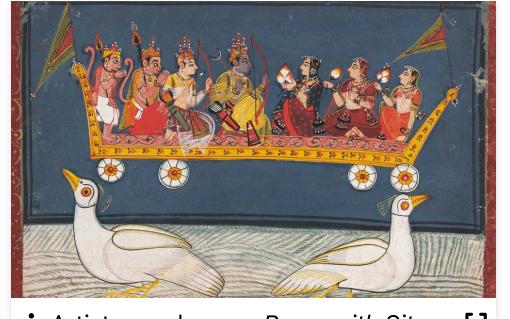


⋮ Sahadeva, The Idols of Krishna and...



⋮ Ekabhishek, Flower garland sellers outside Banke Bihari... ⋮

The sacred text of the *Rāmāyaṇa* also features jasmine as a symbol of purity and beauty. The *Rāmāyaṇa* recounts the life of Rāma, a human incarnation of Lord Vishnu who defeats the demon Rāvaṇa. A passage from the Sundarakāṇḍa, the fifth book of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, uses the motif of jasmine to help establish the youthful beauty of Rāma's wife, Sītā.¹⁴ Similes liken her features to a waxing moon, a seed on the cusp of germination, and jasmine buds. Jasmine flowers release their strongest, most intoxicating scents when they bloom, so comparing Sītā's teeth to jasmine buds—rather than an already-blossomed jasmine flower—characterizes her as a youthful, vigorous woman whose enticing beauty is yet to be fully realized.¹⁵



Artist once known, *Rama with Sita...*

Buddhism also regards jasmine as a flower of spiritual significance. In his book *The Culture of Flowers*, anthropologist Jack Goody includes the following description of a Buddhist ceremony in Sri Lanka: "Young men and girls poured out enormous mounds of jasmine flowers in front of the altars, at the same time singing a prayer under their breath: a mantram. I thought they were praying to Buddha, but the monk who was guiding me explained, 'No, Buddha is no more; He is in nirvana; we cannot pray to him. They are singing: This life is transitory as the beauty of these flowers. May my God [deva] share with me the merit.'¹⁶ The monk's explanation clarifies that some Buddhists adorn shrines with jasmine because they recognize life's fragility in the ephemeral affective qualities of jasmine—symbolism that motivates the pursuit of enlightenment.



A. Savin, *Shrine Room of...*

There are similarities between the ritual use of jasmine in Buddhist and Hindu practices. The Śrī Mahā Bodhi Shrine in Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka, is a popular pilgrimage site for Buddhists. The shrine is home to the millennia-old Jaya Sri Maha Bodhi Tree, which grew from a cutting of the sacred Bodhi Tree under which the Buddha sat when he achieved enlightenment.¹⁷ Like Hindus, Buddhists visiting the Shrine partake in *puja*, making offerings beneath the tree. The *Pichcha Mal Pujawa*, or Great Jasmine Flower Offering, is an annual *puja* attended by thousands of devotees.¹⁸ Participants carry two million jasmine buds in a ceremonial procession to the base of the Jaya Sri Maha Bodhi Tree, where monks distribute the offerings to honor the Buddha.¹⁹



Hiroki Ogawa, *Bodhi Tree Maha Bodhi...*



Chandana Perera, *Pichcha Mal Pooja, 2014, Flickr.*

Sacred Gardens

Jasmine flowers occupy significant sensual and symbolic roles in sacred Islamic gardens. Persian gardens greatly influenced the design of Islamic gardens, including the planting of jasmine.²⁰ Persian royalty designed their gardens to be sensually engaging, and jasmine was crucial to the cultivation of gardens that appealed to visitors' sense of smell.²¹ Pleasing scents became an important element of Persian and Islamic gardens in part because Yunani medicine—a traditional form of Perso-Arabic medicine practiced in Muslim cultures—taught that "exhilarating fragrances" have a positive therapeutic effect on the human body.²² This emphasis on sweet-smelling flowers in the design of sacred gardens made jasmine one of the earliest flower species to be grown in sacred Islamic gardens.²³



⋮ Ahmad Masoominezhad, Shazdeh... ☰

Jasmine also became a central floral figure in Islamic gardens because it is a species that thrives and blooms during monsoons.²⁴ During the monsoon season, Islamic gardens became especially lush with shady and fragrant vegetation. In climates dominated by extreme heat and deserts, this greenery, paired with the gardens' flowing channels of water, made Islamic gardens sanctuaries where the "aroma of wet earth, spicy and sweet herbs, and rich-smelling flowers such as champa and jasmine was a relief from the choking dust of summer."²⁵ The stark contrast between the oases of Islamic gardens and the sweltering conditions outside the garden walls has likely contributed to interpretations of these sacred gardens as reflections of Paradise, as described in the Qur'an and the Hadith.²⁶ The following verse appears in *Sura* (chapter) 13, verse 4 of the Qur'an:



⋮ Amir Pashaei, The Persian Fin... ☰

*On the earth are tracts adjoining one another, and vineyards, fields of corn and date-palm trees, some forked, some with single trunks, yet all irrigated by the self-same water, though We make some more excellent than the others in fruit. There are surely signs in them for those who understand.*²⁷

This excerpt describes the paradise of nourishing plants and fertile lands God/Allah has created on earth, suggesting that those who are faithful will realize that these elements of life on earth are reflections of what they will experience in Heaven. Many of the features listed are common in Islamic gardens, notably palms, vines, flowing water, and fruiting trees. The full-bodied sensory experience curated in part by the powerful fragrance of flowers such as jasmine immerses visitors in Islamic gardens, and by extension, the Paradise they symbolize.



Amir Pashaei, *T...* [2]



Ajay Suresh, *The Islamic Gardens of...* [2]

Sacred Hindu gardens created for the worship of Lord Krishna are quite different from Islamic gardens in both design and function. The city of Vrindavan in North India is a pilgrimage center for Hindus who worship Lord Krishna, as the city is believed to be his childhood home. Worshipers find Lord Krishna's divine presence in Vrindavan's spiritually charged nature and topography.²⁸ A site of particular significance is Seva Kunj, Lord Krishna's walled garden, which is densely covered in jasmine vines.²⁹ Sacred texts describe the sentience of plants in Vrindavan, including jasmine. For example, the painting to the right depicts a scene from the *Bhagavata Purana* where a group of Lord Krishna's devotees (called *gopis*, or cowherd women) search for Lord Krishna in the forests of Vrindavan.³⁰ The *gopis* gesture to jasmine vines as if they were speaking to a fellow human, asking the plants if they have seen Lord Krishna. Vrindavan's jasmine vines—among the city's other plants—are imbued with sentience and sacred importance, to the point that they have become a spiritual conduit for Lord Krishna's faithful.



Artist once known, *Cowherd Wome...* [2]

Seva Kunj situates visitors in embodied, sensual interspecies relationships with the goal of allowing them to feel Lord Krishna's presence. The walls surrounding the garden help focus connections between "the devotee and the divine," as they impose a sense of sequestered wilderness dominated by jasmine vines—Lord Krishna's symbolic flower.³¹ The design of Seva Kunj differs from that of sacred Islamic gardens in part because it has no symmetrical pathways to establish ordered movement through the grounds. It also has no decorative details such as fountains or pavilions. Although both types of gardens are designed to bring visitors closer to the divine, Islamic gardens achieve this by recreating imagery of Paradise, while Seva Kunj places visitors in direct sensual interaction with the sentient nonhuman beings of the garden, stimulating a setting where deities can appear on earth.³²



Atarax42, *View of Seva Kunj in...* [2]

Adornment and Ceremony

Jasmine flowers have long been used as forms of personal adornment, offering another perspective on the meanings humans attach to jasmine at individual and societal levels. South Indian Tamil poetry dated between 100 BCE and 250 CE describes women scenting and decorating their hair with jasmine. For example, the following stanza from Tamil poet Pēyanār Ainkuruṇūru's *Seven Said by the Foster Mother* describes a young woman wearing jasmine in her hair for a romantic evening with her beloved.



McKay Savage, *Jasmine Cultivation...*

*Minstrels sing the jasmine songs / of evening, / and his woman, /
brow shining, jewelry flaming, / wears jasmine in her hair.³³*

In an 1839 letter, an English doctor working in Ghazipur, India observed that many of the city's women applied jasmine oils to their hair and bodies.³⁴ Since the letter is written from the perspective of an outsider, we do not know the women's reasons for wearing jasmine perfumes, but the flowers' strong associations with sensorial beauty in Hinduism make its popularity as a perfume unsurprising. The doctor's labeling of Indian people as "natives" is offensive.³⁵ The term has strong racist and colonial connotations when used by non-Indigenous people.

scent very strong. After the last process, the seeds are taken in their swollen state and placed in a mill; the oil is then expressed, and possesses most fully the scent of the flower.* The oil is kept in prepared skins called *dubbers*, and is sold at so much per seer. The *Jasmine* and *Bela†* are the two flowers from which the natives in this district chiefly produce their scented oil, the *Chumbut‡* is another; but I have been unable to procure any of this. The season for manufacture is coming on. The present oils were manufactured a year ago, and do not possess the powerful scent of that which has been recently prepared. Distillation is never made use of for this purpose as it is with the roses, the extreme heat, (from its being in the middle of the rains, when the trees come into flower) would most likely carry off all the scent. The *Jasmine*, or *Chymbel* as it is called, is used very largely amongst the women, the hair of the head, and the body, being daily smeared with some of it. The specimen I send you costs at the rate of two Rupees per seer.

Dr. John Jackson, "Art. VI.—Note to..."

Gajra, traditionally made of jasmine, are flower garlands worn primarily by South Indian women for ceremonies and as everyday accessories.³⁶ Jasmine is often the flower of choice for hair adornment due to its strong, pleasant scent.³⁷ Jasmine flowers are also a common design motif in South Indian saris.³⁸ Wearing jasmine allows women to adorn themselves with a symbol of beauty, love, and "deep affection."³⁹ This symbolism makes jasmine an especially important accessory during wedding ceremonies in South India.⁴⁰



Challiyan, *Garlands of Jasmine...*

To make *gajra* and flower garlands for religious practice and ceremonies, merchants and artists procure flowers from massive, colorful, and fragrant flower markets. Flower growers arrive early with large baskets of flower blossoms, which they spread out for clients to inspect. Growers work with brokers to secure regular clients from businesses and temples, and they continue selling until about ten in the morning, when the flowers begin to pass their peak freshness.⁴¹



⋮ Aaron Antony, A Colorful Vendor of... [•]

The prominence of jasmine as the “flower of love” is beautifully represented in the painting *Kakubha Ragini*. It is one of a series of north Indian miniature paintings from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries called *Ragamala*. The paintings illustrate poems inspired by *ragas*, which are evocative, often romance-focused classical music performances.⁴² *Kakubha Ragini* depicts a woman wandering in a forest while carrying jasmine garlands for her partner. Although the inclusion of animals and bright colors establish a whimsical tone, the woman’s garlands suggest an undercurrent of tension, as they are symbols of love which may go unclaimed if she cannot find her beloved.⁴³



⋮ Artist once known, *Kakubha Ragini*,... [•]

Jasmine Tea Production in China

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, jasmine flowers were introduced in Fuzhou, China’s most important city for tea production, as early as the Western Han Dynasty (206 BCE–9 CE). Jasmine has likely been cultivated in this region to scent tea since the fifth century, though its popularity did not become widespread until the Qing Dynasty (1644–1912), when tea became one of China’s major export commodities.⁴⁴ Jasmine tea is normally produced using a combination of jasmine flower petals and green tea leaves. The jasmine flowers are grown at high altitudes and picked in the early morning on hot summer days before they have fully blossomed to preserve their fragrance.



⋮ A Look at Jasmine Tea Production in China's Fujian [•]

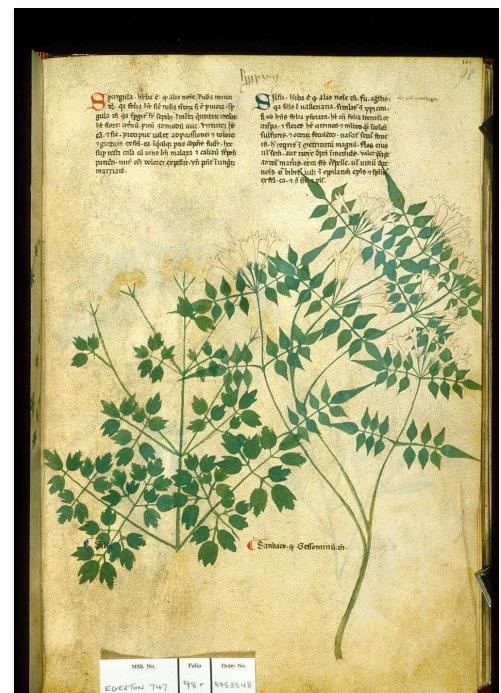
Jasmine also holds spiritual significance in Chinese culture. During the Chinese New Year, or Spring Festival, flowers are often sold to decorate homes, as they are symbols of prosperity and long life.⁴⁵ As long ago as the eighteenth century, jasmine, peonies, and fruit blossoms were sold for the New Year, having been grown in hothouses.⁴⁶ Jasmine is also a Chinese symbol of eternal love, continuing the cross-cultural theme of jasmine as a flower of passion and sensuality.⁴⁷



⋮ Nancy Wong, Chinese New Year... [2]

Jasmine's European Introduction

Europeans likely first cultivated jasmine in late medieval Islamic gardens along the Iberian Peninsula.⁴⁸ What is perhaps the earliest Western scientific illustration of jasmine can be found in the *Tractatus de herbis*, an herbal thought to have been compiled in Salerno, Italy, sometime between 1280 and 1350.⁴⁹ Salerno was the location of the first lay school of medicine in Europe and brought together a body of mixed-faith practitioners from Muslim, Jewish, and Christian religious traditions.⁵⁰ The fifteenth-century *Hortus Sanitatis*, an encyclopedia of flora and fauna that describes the medicinal properties and uses of each plant, lists *J. sambac* as being "good for sinus headaches and other ills caused by an excess of phlegm."⁵¹



⋮ *Tractatus de herbis* (British Library,... [2]

As jasmine spread from Asia across Europe, its use as a fragrant source of atmospheric perfume traveled with it. In his mid-fourteenth century collection of tales, *The Decameron*, Italian writer Giovanni Boccaccio describes garden walls heady with the scent of climbing jasmine and roses.⁵² Jasmine features in Christian manuscript illumination as early as the first decade of the sixteenth century, including in the exquisite *Book of Hours*, produced for Anne of Brittany with illustrations by Jean Bourdichon. In one of many decorative floral borders, a sprig of flowering white jasmine is featured to *trompe l'oeil* effect alongside a snail, a fly, and a ladybug. Art historian and plantswoman Celia Fisher has written that "just as fourteenth-century Italian herbals [like the *Tractatus de herbis*] owed a debt to Arabic plantsmanship, so the more exotic plants depicted in [Bourdichon's] margins were those first cultivated in the gardens of Islam."⁵³ Indeed, the *Book of Hours* documents the movement of jasmine from modern-day Spain and Italy into France, which must have occurred before the production of the manuscript.



⋮ Jean Bourdichon, *Horae ad usum...* ⋮

Since the late Middle Ages in the West, jasmine's physical characteristics and powerful pleasant scent have inspired a variety of symbolic meanings in religious and literary contexts. In the Renaissance, jasmine became one among a selection of flowers symbolically associated with the Madonna, owing to its white color, sweet odor, and star shape.⁵⁴ In a lush painting attributed to Sandro Botticelli and his studio assistants, the Virgin and Child are surrounded by six angels and Saint John the Baptist. Copious roses and lilies—the flowers most associated with the Madonna—overflow from tributary pedestals and encircle the heads of angels. The infant Christ holds a pomegranate, another allusion to Mary's fertility. The angel immediately to the right of the Virgin is depicted with a crown of sprouting jasmine.



⋮ Sandro Botticelli and Studio, *Virgin...* ⋮

In Lorenzo Lott's *Sacra Conversazione* (Sacred Conversation), an angel crowns the Virgin Mary with a wreath of subtle jasmine blossoms as she sits alongside Saint Catherine of Alexandria. Saint Catherine is also occasionally associated with jasmine in paintings of the Italian Renaissance period, including in an oil on panel by Bartolomeo Veneto which pictures the saint's veil adorned with jasmine flowers as she gazes heavenward. By this period, jasmine's white flowers had come to symbolize not only purity, but also "grace, elegance, amiability, divine love, and heavenly happiness."⁵⁵



• Lorenzo Lotto, *Sacra Conversazione*... [•]



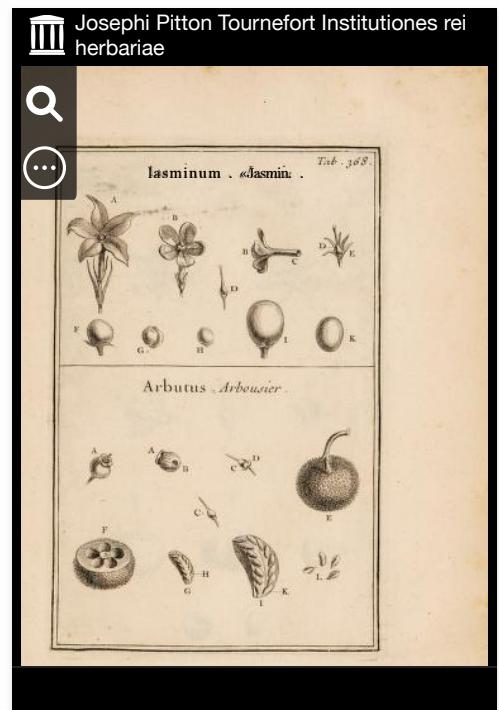
• Bartolomeo Veneto,... [•]



• After Bernardino Luini,... [•]

Scent and Sensibility: Jasmine Perfume and Floriculture in Early Modern Europe

In the late sixteenth century, Henry Lyte published *A niewe herball or historie of plantes, a treatise on the cultivation and practical use of plants in England*.⁵⁶ He records that "Jasmine groweth in manner of a hedge or quickset, and must be led amongst and carried as the rose or vine...The flowers be white and long of a sweet and pleasant savour."⁵⁷ Lyte also reports that "Jasmine groweth in some countries of his owne kinde, as in Spaine, and some places of England, in this countrie it is planted in gardens....Jasmine flowreth in July and August, but the fruit in this countrie commeth not to perfection." Of jasmine's "virtues," the plant was recommended as a cure for red spots, cold swellings, or hard lumps "when it is applied and laid thereto." Lyte also notes the use of oil of jasmine as an herbal remedy: "Jasmine drieth reumes or stilling downe of humours from the head, and the moistness of the braine, and profiteth much against the cold infirmities of the same." As in the *Tractatus de Herbis*, jasmine has often been prescribed both as a soothing and drying agent counteracting the forces of the wetter and colder afflictions particularly associated with phlegm in humoral medicine.



Beyond its medicinal uses, European gardeners primarily cultivated jasmine to create a pleasing, often enveloping sensory atmosphere. Since jasmine is a climbing plant, it was used to cover walls and trellises, as well as arbors and bowers, with a blanket of sweet floral fragrance. It could also be potted and kept indoors.⁵⁸ In her study of early modern perfume, Holly Dugan argues that the scent of jasmine was a sensory indicator of private, enclosed space—both indoors and outdoors—and thus also a symbol of pleasure. In forming the vegetal walls and canopies of garden spaces and perfuming interior rooms via planter pots and potpourri bowls, jasmine became an olfactory signal of comfort, intimacy, and pleasure. While jasmine had long signified purity and spiritual love, its sensory engagement and association with women's domains made it "a key trope for defining eroticized space."⁵⁹



⋮ Madeleine Françoise Basseporte an... [•]

Portraiture and Gendered Symbolism

Jasmine features in the famous *Guirlande de Julie* (*Garland of Julie*), a book of madrigal poems composed by a group of writers in seventeenth-century Paris as a tribute to the beautiful Julie d'Angennes, the daughter of the noted salon host the Marquise de Rambouillet. In this period, salons were social and intellectual spaces attended by elite men and women and led by an individual woman in the domestic space of her home. The poems in the *Guirlande de Julie* claim to speak in the voice of their flower subject, and their *accompanying representations* (produced by decorative and scientific flower painter Nicolas Robert) are like painted portraits. The assembled collection of flowers with their associated symbolic meanings are a metaphor communicating the dedicatee's many virtues.



⋮ La Guirlande de... [•]



⋮ La Guirlande de... [•]

A century later, in 1754, the official mistress of King Louis XV of France, Jeanne-Antoinette Poisson, Marquise de Pompadour, commissioned a portrait of herself standing outdoors, enveloped in the lush greenery of a garden. Occupying a powerful position at court, Pompadour was a formidable patron of the arts throughout the middle of the eighteenth century. In the portrait, painted by Carle Van Loo, Pompadour carries a chestnut wicker basket which has been filled to the brim with roses, peonies, lilies-of-the-valley, and jasmine, a sprig of which she holds aloft in her right hand. Around 1750, Madame de Pompadour and the king ended the physically intimate part of their relationship and began a steadfast friendship. In the wake of this shift, Pompadour commissioned several allegorical sculptures from Jean-Baptiste Pigalle (1714–1785) which portrayed her in the guise of Friendship. These sculptures were also incorporated into the decorative schemes of her various châteaux, though outdoors, amid her beloved gardens. In her Van Loo portrait, the token of jasmine that Pompadour holds may also gently allude to the spiritual—rather than physical—love she and Louis now shared.

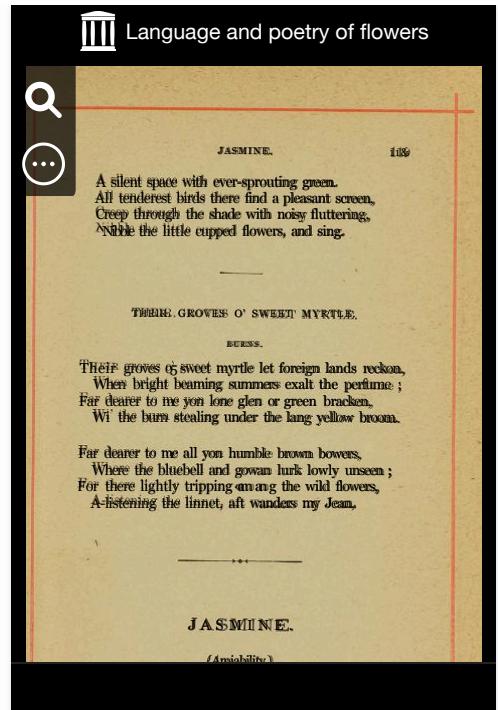


Carle Van Loo, *Jeanne-Antoinette...

In 1839, an American edition of Louisa Johnson's *Every Lady Her Own Gardener* was published. Johnson wrote the book for the express purpose of guiding women in managing and cultivating gardens which were both functional and aesthetic. In the entry on jasmine, Johnson remarks that the plant's "wild luxuriant appearance" perhaps constitutes "its chief grace."⁶⁰ "The jasmine is a beautiful screen in summer," she writes, "wreathing its festoons through trellis-work; and it appears to me that nature presents not, in our colder climes, a more fragrant and beautiful bouquet than a mixture of roses and jasmines." These flowers were often referenced together in allusion to their scent. Indeed, as the seventeenth-century English poet Abraham Cowley penned, "Who that has reason and his smell / Would not among roses and jasmine dwell?"⁶¹



As a cultivator, Johnson uses the same language as poets to describe jasmine. To her readers she discloses, "I have seen very fanciful and beautiful devices invented to display the beauty of the jasmine. Their shoots grow so rapidly and luxuriantly, that if the plant is allowed to luxuriate, it will soon cover any frame-work with its drooping beauty."⁶² Among the selection of poems celebrating jasmine gathered in the 1884 *Language and Poetry of Flowers*, compiled by Mrs. C. M. Kirtland, poets from William Cowper (1731–1800) and Jane Taylor (1783–1824) to Thomas Moore (1779–1852) portray jasmine as languorous and intoxicating.⁶³

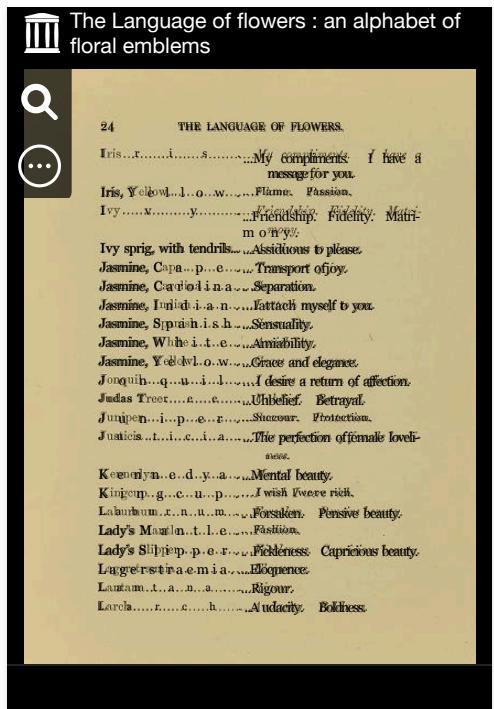


In an issue of *Household Words*, Charles Dickens penned an ode to jasmine. He exclaims "Beautiful Jasmine!" proposes to "crown the Jasmine empress and queen of all [flowers]," and posits that it is "the Isis of flowers, with veiled face and covered feet."⁶⁴ Dickens's reverence of a chaste jasmine with her "veiled face and covered feet" may reflect a Victorian anxiety over tensions arising from continued cultural glorification of chastity and societally enforced repression of sexuality.



Frontispiece for *L'Ancien et le...*

Such sentiments are echoed in the many symbolic meanings attributed to various species of jasmine in flower dictionaries, which were hugely popular in the nineteenth century. The dictionaries repeatedly use the same language to describe jasmine's symbolic meanings, but they present a multiplicity of distinct connotations depending on the type of jasmine. For example, in *The Language of Flowers: An Alphabet of Floral Emblems*, different meanings are ascribed to Cape Jasmine ("transport of joy"), Carolina Jasmine ("separation"), Indian Jasmine ("I attach myself to you"), Spanish Jasmine ("sensuality"), White Jasmine ("amiability"), and Yellow Jasmine ("grace and elegance"). This poetic fragmentation suggests not only that jasmine's many varieties were tasked with propping up the plant's dual associations with the spiritual and sensual, but also perhaps that readers of the time were knowledgeable enough to be able to identify each of these varieties by sight.



Current Cultivation of Jasmine for Perfume

Jasmine is one of the principal flowers cultivated in Grasse, a town at the foot of the Maritime Alps in the south of France, known globally as a center of perfume production. The flowers are harvested between July and October. *Enfleurage*, the traditional means of harvesting essential oil, entails embedding the fresh flowers in animal fat, which soaks up the scented oils. The fat is then scraped away, and alcohol is used to extract the essential oil from the pomade.⁶⁵ Today, volatile solvent extraction is a more commonly used process. Jasmine flowers are immersed in a chemical solvent that draws out the scented oil from the flowers' petals, allowing them to be drained. The flowers, now devoid of their scent, are often recycled and used as fertilizer.



In his 1771 *Flora's Toilette, or Essay on the Plants and Flowers that can serve to ornament Women, including different means of preparing Essences, Pomades, Rouges, Powders, Make-up, and Scented Waters*, French physician and naturalist Pierre Buc'hoz notes that a fragrant water of jasmine can only be produced through a multi-stage process of drawing the scent out of the petals with a combination of substances.⁶⁶

 Toilette de flore ou essai sur les plantes et les fleurs qui peuvent servir d'ornement...



33

J A

139. **J**ANIPABAQZ⁶⁷ Geniperie p, Genipa fructu ovato. C'est un arbre de Bréfil. Son fruit donne un jus qui , quoique blanc d'abord , devient noir ensuite. Les Sauvages s'en servent pour noircir leur peau, lorsqu'ils vont à la guerre , pour paraître plus effroyables à leurs ennemis. Les femmes de ce pays peignent avec ce jus leurs mèches en noir, lorsqu'ils font la de la couleur rouge.

140. **J**ACINTHE. Hyacinthus. La beauté de cette fleur la fait rechercher dans tous les Pays. Les Dames en font une de leurs parures les plus modestes. On met des oignons de Jacinthe dans des carafes d'eau sur les cheminées pendant l'hiver & elles y fleutent très-bien. K. les Recettes 69, 70.

141. **J**ASMIN. Jasminum. L'odeur des fleurs de Jasmin est si délicieuse , qu'on a tâché de la transporter dans plusieurs fluides. Les fleurs ne fournissent point d'eau odorante par la distillation ; ainsi l'essence de Jasmin qu'on nous apporte d'Italie, n'est qu'une huile de Béen aromatisée par les fleurs du Jasmin. Pour cet effet on imbibé du

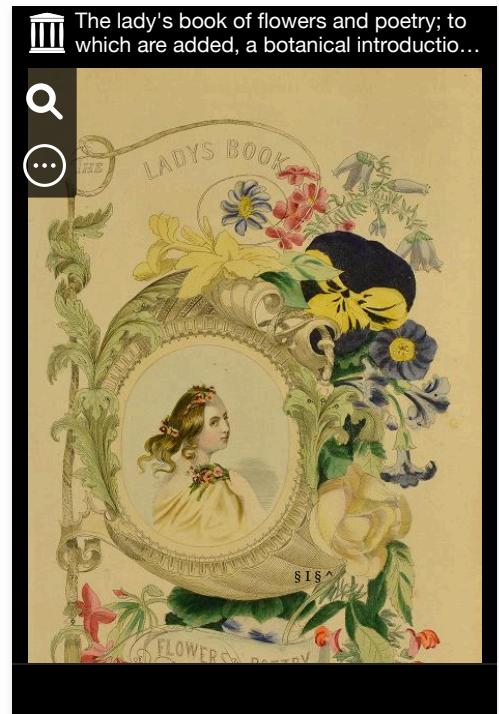
Jasmine essential oil, while often not the dominant ingredient, is today used as a key ingredient in major perfumes, including in Chanel no. 5. Jasmine's omnipresence in wearable scents suggests that its fragrance continues to be a meaningful form of personal adornment, and yet, something so ubiquitous that one may fail to notice its sensual presence.



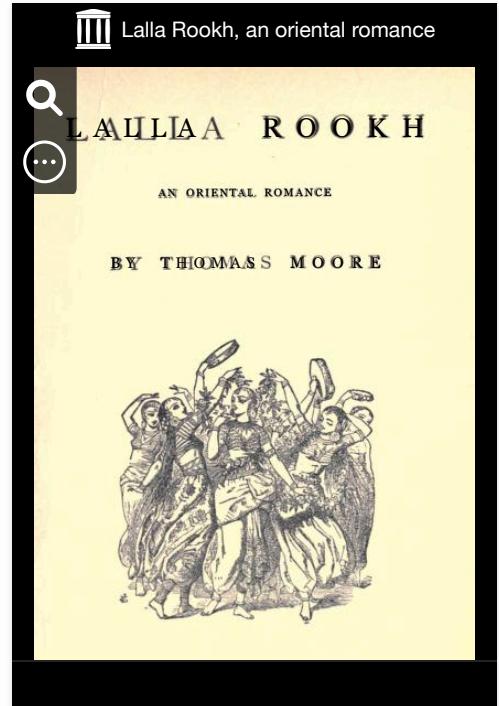
Philip Haslett, *The Jasmine Pickers,...*

Jasmine and Orientalism

Jasmine became popular in Europe by the fifteenth century, likely introduced through networks of trade and colonialism.⁶⁷ With the flowers, Western nations also imported and adopted many of the symbolic meanings that cultures of the Middle East, Central, South, and East Asia have shaped around jasmine over millennia. While part of the motivation for embracing this "language of flowers" emerged from admiration of and interest in Eastern cultures, many white Europeans and Americans stayed committed to their "deeply ingrained feeling[s] about the inferiority or primitiveness of these major cultures."⁶⁸ It is therefore unsurprising that European and American authors sometimes used orientalist references in their books on the language of flowers. For example, in Lucy Hooper's 1842 *Lady's Book of Flowers and Poetry*, she features the following excerpt from oriental poetry to help characterize white jasmine as a flower symbolizing "loveliness" and "amiability": "And brides, as delicate and fair / As the white jasmine flowers they wear."⁶⁹



These lines are from Thomas Moore's 1817 poem *Lalla Rookh*, an oriental romance about a Mughal princess. In the above passage, Moore likens Yemeni women to jasmine's beauty. Although the orientalism in *Lalla Rookh* is somewhat nuanced, as Moore simultaneously "traffics in Orientalist stereotypes" and "emphasizes the elusiveness of cultural identity," the popular poem nevertheless reinforced nineteenth-century readers' stereotypes of Eastern cultures.⁷⁰ Since the *Lady's Book of Flowers and Poetry* was published at the height of *Lalla Rookh*'s popularity, the former's readers would have recognized the passage from Moore's poem in Hooper's entry on white jasmine. By highlighting jasmine's presence in *Lalla Rookh*, Hooper subtly prompts her readers to situate jasmine in the atmosphere of exotic otherness curated by *Lalla Rookh*'s orientalism. Moore's poem, and by extension Hooper's book, also project this otherization onto women from Eastern cultures. Although the above-quoted comparison of Yemeni women to jasmine is superficially flattering, it subjects these women to the same otherization and exoticization of the "oriental" as jasmine.



The Jasmine Revolution

In 2010, Tunisia's Dignity Revolution became the first in a series of political uprisings across the Middle East and North Africa, collectively labeled the Arab Spring by Western media. Tunisians overthrew a national government they viewed as corrupt and at the root of increasing socioeconomic inequalities. Inspired by Tunisia's national flower, Tunisian journalist Zied El Hani coined 'Jasmine Revolution' in an article celebrating his compatriots' achievements during the Revolution.⁷¹ For Tunisians, jasmine represents "purity, the sweetness of life, and tolerance."⁷² But many Tunisians are suspicious of Westerners using the label 'Jasmine Revolution,' as these outsiders have cast their own meanings on the Tunisians' revolution by appropriating this phrase.



M. Rais, Anti-Government...

For example, an unnamed Tunisian quoted in a 2011 *Le Monde* article declared "No to the reductive and postcard-esque name 'jasmine.'"⁷³ Their reference to postcards is an allusion to jasmine's prominence in the Tunisian tourist industry, indicating that the speaker saw orientalist intentions in the association between their revolution and jasmine. The flowers are heavily featured in Tunisia's tourism campaigns, and merchants sell jasmine at popular vacation spots on beaches and by cafés, curating an environment which encourages (mainly Western) tourists to associate Tunisia with the orientalist tropes of exoticism, purity, and sensuality attached to jasmine.⁷⁴



Emilio Labrador, Jasmine Vendor,...

Conclusion

Throughout the long history of human–jasmine relationships, jasmine has become a vessel for the meanings that individuals, groups, and even governments aim to communicate. Jasmine's affective qualities not only make it a powerful sensual adornment and symbol of love, but also an important votive offering in Hinduism and a symbol of life's precariousness and brevity in Buddhism. In horticultural contexts, jasmine helps construct heavenly scenes in sacred Islamic gardens and allows worshipers to forge sensual connections with their gods in gardens dedicated to Hindu deities. In Western European art, jasmine continues to develop a complex symbolic language, especially in paintings featuring women posing with jasmine flowers. Of course, all the meanings associated with jasmine are not positive, as Western depictions of Asian, Middle Eastern, and North African cultures have fueled orientalist framings of jasmine. As humans continue to interact with jasmine, we will doubtless imbue the plants with many additional layers of meaning, making it important to understand the existing legacies of jasmine's symbolic significance to different cultures.



⋮ HelenOnline, *Chinese Jasmine in...* ⋮

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