

Heirloom Pelargoniums, some with hundreds of years of horticultural history, are among 2,000 kinds of plants in an herb collection in rural New Jersey.



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**By Margaret Roach** Photographs by Hannah Yoon

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A pot of Old Fashioned Rose scented geranium grew on the windowsill of every college dorm room that Patrick McDuffee occupied in his years studying biology at James Madison University in Virginia.

It was a plant that his grandfather, Cyrus Hyde, had introduced Patrick to at age 17, teaching him to train it as a topiary. It's also the key ingredient in the herbal vanilla cake that his grandmother, Louise Hyde, still bakes today.

That heirloom Pelargonium, with hundreds of years of horticultural history, was a living piece of Hyde family tradition. It is one of more than 2,000 kinds of plants — including 86 other scented-leaf geraniums — that form the world-class herb collection at Well-Sweep Herb Farm, which Cyrus and Louise Hyde founded in 1969 in rural Port Murray, N.J.



When Patrick McDuffee finished college in 2012, he relocated to New Jersey join his grandparents and his uncle, David Hyde, at Well-Sweep Herb Farm.



Mr. McDuffee grew up in Virginia, and only visited the farm a couple of times a year back then. When he finished college in 2012, though, he and his windowsill plants relocated to join his grandparents and his uncle, David Hyde, who runs the business and has lived at Well-Sweep since age 6.

Mr. McDuffee's grandfather died in 2020, but his grandmother, now 87, whom he calls "the grandmaster gardener," is a hard-working member of the generational triumvirate that is Well-Sweep.

Today Mr. McDuffee, now 36 and the farm manager, has a job description nearly as diverse as the nursery's offerings, which include not just herbs but native plants (a passion of his uncle's), carnivorous plants (one of Mr. McDuffee's loves) and much more.



Dylan Ward, a part-time member of the Well-Sweep Herb Farm staff, tends the scented geraniums.

He juggles office duties with propagating and caring for plants and managing the crew. He helps to welcome visitors daily in season, and at a couple of festival-like weekend-long events each year. At the next of those, Aug. 30 and 31, he'll give a special "scented geranium deep-dive talk," he said, as just one of many featured expert presenters.

He is even what amounts to the farm's chief poultry officer. Breeding showy long-tailed Onagadori roosters was another of Cyrus Hyde's fascinations, and apparently a love of the birds is another trait his grandson inherited.

Between the plants and poultry, Mr. McDuffee said, those genetics classes he took at college have really served him well.



# From Acanthus to Za'atar



Well-Sweep's Pelargoniums are on display beside 50-year-old topiaries Cyrus Hyde trained from lemon verbena in the formal herb garden section of the farm's six-plus acres of themed gardens.

Whether that long-ago gift plant came with his grandfather's intention that Mr. McDuffee would someday follow its powerful scent to the family farm, who knows, but it certainly made an imprint. "I never really realized what I had until I was in school growing some things on my windowsill," he said.

What he had was a world waiting for him of plants and more plants, a trove ranging from Acanthus (bear's breeches) to za'atar (*Thymbra spicata*). Botanical gardens around the country are regular Well-Sweep customers,

and though there is no current online mail-order shopping cart, phone inquiries are welcome.

There are 200-ish creeping and upright thymes, some 50 mints, and an extensive lavender collection, “including antique varieties you can only find here,” said Mr. McDuffee.





Well-Sweep's 2,000-plus plant list boasts an extensive lavender collection, "including antique varieties you can only find here," said Patrick McDuffee.



And there are all those Pelargoniums, tender perennials with their genetic origins in tropical southern Africa, that in most places in the country need to winter indoors on a sunny windowsill like he provided back at school, before he had greenhouses to stash them in.

They are willing subjects, he tells prospective customers, ready to offer an invigorating whiff anytime, and if the growth gets a bit leggy during the low-light season, pinch away, because leaves of many varieties make for delicious homegrown tea.



Spanish Lavender Pelargonium smells just like the other herb it is named for.



The dark maroon-purple blooms of Umckaloabo (*Pelargonium sidoides*) contrast against scalloped silvery leaves.



In the frost-free season, Well-Sweep's Pelargoniums are on display beside four 50-year-old topiaries Cyrus Hyde trained from lemon verbena (*Aloysia triphylla*), in the formal herb garden section of six-plus acres of themed gardens.

“People can go and read the signs on the Pelargoniums, and scratch and sniff the plants to their own delight,” Mr. McDuffee said. “It’s a scratch-and-sniff paradise.”

Coconut to Parmesan





Pheasant's Foot, left, smells like Parmesan. Grey Lady Plymouth, right, popular in the cut-flower industry for silvery-gray foliage that holds up in a vase, smells like a rose.

Will it be pine or coconut, nutmeg or strawberry — or perhaps apple or lime? There's a scented geranium to suit most olfactory preferences, roughly lumped into fragrance categories of rose, citrus, fruit, mint and spice. (Some have aromas that might not top anyone's wish list, but make for fun shout-outs at tours Mr. McDuffee gives to young visitors. Take the Pheasant's Foot variety, for instance, he said: "When I have kids smell it, I tell them it smells like stinky feet or Parmesan cheese.")

Blindfolded, it might be tricky to tell if you were inhaling a Pelargonium or some other plant. Besides the many mint types — including standouts like Peppermint Spice and Chocolate Mint, he said — there are lavender smell-alikes, such as Spanish Lavender.



The scented geranium called Strawberry is a customer favorite.



Chocolate Mint is a standout among mint-scented Pelargoniums.

Grey Lady Plymouth, popular in the cut-flower industry for its silvery-gray foliage that holds up in a vase, smells like a rose. The fine-leaved Pelargonium named Southernwood, one of the most-drought-tolerant scented geraniums, looks and smells just like actual southernwood (*Artemisia abrotanum*).

A recent addition to the list, French Vanilla, bears Mr. McDuffee's favorite fragrance, and there is a one-of-a-kind called Black Pepper. "As you pull your face away from the plant," he said, "it smells like you just put some pepper on your plate."





The most skeletal foliage of all scented geraniums is Filicifolium.



Cy's Sunburst Lemon Crispum scented geranium, a Well-Sweep original.

As if fragrance were not attraction enough, scented geraniums' range of leaf forms and colors are intoxicating, too. Peppermint's large, felted, silvery-green foliage make it a popular choice. At the other extreme are ones with skeletal foliage, none more dramatically fine-textured than Filicifolium, Mr. McDuffee said. In between are various oak-leaf choices, among the many shapes and sizes.

Lovers of variegated leaves have many choices; Charmay Snow Flurry and Snowflake are two of Mr. McDuffee's recommendations. Mrs. Hyde always grows Variegated Mint Scented Rose, its finely textured leaves edged in



white, the making of a delicious mint tea.

You could even select a scented geranium for its flowers — like the dark maroon-purple ones of Umckaloabo (*Pelargonium sidoides*), contrasted against its low mound of small, scalloped silvery leaves. The one Mr. McDuffee calls Pansy (formally, Madam Layal) is a Victorian variety bred to bear flowers resembling its namesake's.

## Scented Geraniums Year-Round



Louise Hyde, now 87, whom her grandson calls “the grandmaster gardener,” is a hard-working member of the generational triumvirate that is Well-Sweep.



All the scented geraniums want plenty of sun, and a fast-draining, bark-based potting soil with a little fertilizer added that Mr. McDuffee recommends refreshing to start each spring. Either pot the plant up into slightly larger quarters, or prune its roots to make room for some new medium before returning it to the same pot.

He also gives the leggy, winter-weary plants a haircut.

“One of the things that I like to do in the spring on their first day outside besides root prune is prune the top, too,” he said, “because those long internodes are not strong.” The plants respond with tighter spring and summer growth.

He often does another pruning in midsummer, after the plants bloom, to bring them back into shape. Remember: tea leaves (or a cake).

One needn't be a master herbalist to brew “a little bit of medicine,” he said, and recommends his first love, Old Fashioned Rose, as a great cupful. “And it turns the water a light shade of pink — it's simple witchcraft for your friends.”



The healing garden of medicinal plants at Well-Sweep in Port Murray, N.J., is popular with visitors.

It's also an ingredient in organic tick repellents, he added, "so when I go on a hike, I trim a couple of leaves off to rub on my shins, and I leave a leaf in my sock, too."

Another good tea subject is Lemon Crispum, known as the finger bowl geranium after the Victorian tradition of putting its leaves in a bowl of water to rinse your fingers in. Cyrus Hyde selected two sports from Lemon Crispum over the years, one with a slight golden edge that he named Well-Sweep Golden Lemon Crispum, and another, with a bolder gold edge, called Cy's Sunburst, "which is now propagated all over the country and world as one of the top-selling scented geraniums," Mr. McDuffee said.





Both Louis Hyde and her grandson, Patrick McDuffee, enjoy making a cup of herbal tea from fresh-cut scented geranium leaves.

In their continuing grandfather-to-grandson tradition, “a third evolution” of Lemon Crispum is in the works, Mr. McDuffee said. He’s been propagating a sport with all-gold leaves for a few years that he hopes to introduce someday.

It already has a name: Cy’s Gold Sol. Grandpa’s spirit shines on.

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*Margaret Roach is the creator of the website and podcast A Way to Garden, and a book of the same name.*

