

Some of the Best Plants for Homemade Potpourri

Dr. Arthur O. Tucker

Our kids have a memory from their childhood of making potpourri in the upstairs bathtub or the plastic kiddie pool during the summer. Then, later in the year, when they returned to school, they took some polyethylene bags tied with decorative ribbons to their teachers as presents. We apparently educated at least one teacher, who returned a note after receiving our salty potpourri "Thank you for the unusual herbal tea."

Probably because of the cost of spices, potpourri only dates from the late 18th century. In a letter by Lady Luxborough to Shenstone, dated November the 28th 1749, she remarked, "it... Might be called a pots-pourri, which is a pot full of all kinds of flowers which are as severely perfumed and commonly when mixed and rotten, smelled very ill..." I think that Lady Luxborough had a bad batch of potpourri, because today the Sweet Rosie sent of potpourri is very popular to sent rooms, drawers and closets.

The word potpourri comes from the French, meaning "rotten pot." As originally created, it was prepared like sauerkraut with alternating layers of kosher salt and rose petals.

About 20 years ago, however, the cost of rose petals and the concomitant hand labor resulted in manufacturers looking to botanicals composed of abundant cellulose and/or lignin and containing tiny air pockets to hold artificial essences and release them slowly. At first, they tried wood shavings and corncobs, but that did not smell well.

Then, the manufacturers turn to the already existing dried flower industry and so today the commercial potpourri sold at the stores are essentially lawn sweepings from India and Thailand, bleached or dried putrescent colors and then saturated with disgusting synthetic fragrances... Enough to give real potpourri a bad name! I wonder what Lady Luxborough would say of today's so-called potpourri!

In 1988, Michael Maciarello and I published research on the best old roses to use for distilling rose attar, as compared with the commercially important damask roses, *Rosa damascena* (trigintipetala) and Professor Emile Perrot. We found that the cultivar Hansa, a hybrid of *Rosa Rugosa*, mimicked the commercial attar

from Bulgaria rather well. While blooming mostly in the spring, Hansa had scattered blossoms throughout the growing season. The petals of Hansa are dark pink and retain good color on drying, but the petals are not freely released from the green hypanthium.

Another good rose, but with free release of petals, is Celsiana. The petals of Celsiana are light pink that fade to Brown in moist or wet potpourri... Likewise, the commercial damask roses have good scent but also turn brown.

The Apothecaries Rose, "*Rosa Gallica Officinalis*", is supposed to increase its fragrance on drying, this apocryphal story may have some truth, as the principal components of rose attar, phenylethanol and geraniol, are held bound to sugars, but drying breaks the sugar bond, releasing the phenylethanol and geraniol to the rose fragrance. In addition, the apothecaries Rose is dark red and abundantly produced. However, because the flowers of the apothecaries Rose are produced on shrubs of rather low stature (typically less than knee-high), harvesting is the petals can be a backbreaking chore.

Our recipe for the moist or wet rose potpourri is as follows:

- 2 quarts of rose petals
- Coarse salt, kosher type, do not use iodized salt
- 2 ounces Orris powder
- One fourth ounce ground mace
- One fourth ounce ground cloves
- One small stick of cinnamon, crushed
- One fourth ounce freshly ground nutmeg; do not use already ground nutmeg.
- One fourth ounce ground allspice
- Five drops oil of rose or oil of Jasmine, if desired

Directions:

Prepare a large ceramic crock or plastic flowerpot. Line the bottom with a double layer of cheese cloth and find a plate that fits snugly inside, a weight for the small plate and a large plate to cover.

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Directions continued:

Place all on a large saucer to catch any liquid that seeps out. Gather freshly opened and un-bruised petals in a variety of colors in the morning. Spread out on paper toweling or brown paper and let dry until evening (until they lose about half their bulk and have a leathery, half dry look). Place the petals in the prepared crock or pot, layering roses with salt (starting with petals, ending with salt) only until the container is about two thirds full. Weigh down, cover and store away from heat and light for three weeks.

After three weeks, remove the petals from the jars, shake away excess salt. If the petals of the roses have caked together flake lightly with fingers. Place petals in a large container. Mix Orris and all spices together separately and add to roses. Return to jars with tight fitting lids. Store unopened for six weeks. When ready to use, add oil gradually, stir gently.

Most of the spices are probably already on your kitchen shelf. You can't obtain Orris root try drying some of your old fashion Iris rhizomes by pairing off the outside skin, chopping into small chips and drying. Surprisingly, many Iris rhizomes have the typical violet light fragrance of real Orris. To this completed potpourri, we then add the other materials listed below.

Of course, a good potpourri must have plenty of lavender and or Lavandin blossoms! While we preferred the dark-colored lavenders, such as hidcote or Royal Velvet, usually the bulk of our potpourri contains "Grosso" lavandin because we grow it in the greatest quantity.

We also add all our dried citrus rinds that we have already cut into decorative shapes. To this we have added dried flowers that have good color, such as globe amaranth, Straw flowers and statice.

Infrequently, we also prepare dry rose potpourri, as listed in the following. This method retains the color, but most of the rose fragrance is lost on drying, which seems contrary to the entire reason to preserve the sense of summer.

Directions:

1 quart dried rose petals
14 to one half cup dried rosebuds
1 ounce Orris powder
One tablespoon ground mace
Two tablespoons whole cloves
One vanilla bean, cut or broken into small pieces
One tablespoon whole cardamom in pods, crushed
Two sticks of cinnamon, crushed

20 drops of oil (Orange), or Ten drops each oil of lemon and oil of Orange, Orange and lemon extracts from your kitchen shelf could also be used, but at least double the quantity to make up for the dilution in alcohol.

Combining dried rose petals and rosebuds with Orris. Lightly mix with hands or wooden fork and spoon in a large bowl. Blend mace, cloves, vanilla bean, cardamom and cinnamon separately. Add to rose mix. Blend well. Drop Orange oil over mix; gently.

Place in jars with tight fitting lids. Store unopened for six weeks, shaking often. When ready to use, place in a pretty container.

Dr. Arthur O. Tucker presented this program at the Indiana Horticulture Congress.

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Kindly submitted by Kent Fenley, Greensburg, IN. South Central Rose Society.



A pink blend of dried rose buds and rose petals.

