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July 1, 2011 10:06 pm

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Scents of connection

By Richard Mabey

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Smell is a primitive sense but only in maturity do we come to appreciate its subtleties. As a boy, I needed scents to be outrageous to be memorable. The one that broke through most gloriously was the stinkhorn fungus, its reek of rotting animal unmistakable.

But smells, unlike sights, are hard to describe. To be fixed in our imaginations, they need to be attached to other memories – of place, moment, feeling – and that needs the experience of age.

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I remember the drought of 1976: after three months in the sun, we were all as hard-baked as the riverbeds. The air was scentless. Then, abruptly, September brought torrential rain. When I opened the window, the air was full of a fragrance that captured every good memory I had: sea water drying on skin; the chanterelles my friend used to send from Scotland; my dad painting the fence with creosote – all manner of personal recollections from the scent that follows

a shower of rain on dry earth.

The aroma is called “petrichor”, and it is all the things you imagine it to be. From fallen flower petals, resins and desiccated mushrooms, an array of perfumed essences is washed into the ground and absorbed by porous stones and clay. When warm rain falls, they are released back into the air to rekindle memories of all their ingredients.

It is partly by scents that I navigate my way through the year, and they unlock memories I didn't know I had. The first fragrant wild flower of the year is spurge laurel but my trigger is moschatel in March: the first time I sniffed its tiny five-faced flowers, I was astonished to smell my first girlfriend. As a 16-year-old I assumed this musk and almond aroma was some expensive perfume. Moschatel still transports me to those breathless clinches, and leaves me wondering about the strange evolutionary pathways that link the scent of a

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spring flower with a pubescent girl.

Then there is the warm-cream scent of burnet roses, irrevocably linked for me with the limestone hills of the Burren in Ireland and my dear late friend Tony Evans taking his exquisite photograph of their petals floating in a rock-pool.

Summer's smells are pure pleasure. The scent of crushed wormwood takes me to the Norfolk saltmarshes, where I first had a house of my own.

Then there's gorse, to which I've had a reaction that has nothing to do with memory. It's June, and I'm lying on a patch of heath. The smell is tropical – vanilla and melon along with coconut. Out of the blue, I'm hit by an extra burst of scent. A few minutes later it happens again, and I recall noticing these rhythmic gusts with other flowers. Violets do this because of a chemical called ionone, which briefly anaesthetises our scent buds. A couple of minutes later, the nose recovers and the scent reappears. I wonder is it the same? Or do some plants budget their precious scent molecules, emitting concentrated puffs as come-ons to insects? Does the gorse smell me and know there is a living thing near it? Is it directing its fragrant come-ons my way?

It is an egocentric notion but not out of the question. Natural smells are not random emissions but part of a complex messaging system. Oak leaves that are munched by insects emit a pheromone to promote the production of extra tannin in neighbouring trees, making their leaves bitter to marauders. "We can't hear the trees calling to each other," wrote biologist Colin Tudge, "but the air is abuzz with their conversations ... conducted in vaporous chemistry".

The reason we know so much about scents that we cannot smell is thanks to an instrument invented by James Lovelock in the 1960s, which detects minute traces of chemicals. The electron capture detector has revealed that fruit flies respond to one hundred-millionth of a gram of pheromone produced by Cassia plants and that lima beans affected by spider mite emit a chemical to attract a predator that feeds on the original mites.

This technology could help that gravely threatened creature, the bee. Honeybees can read chemical cues over a range of 40 sq km. But we now know that residues in the exhausts of cars using lead-free petrol react with the odour molecules from flowers, making them indecipherable to bees. This may be one of the causes of the widespread problem of hive collapse.

Smell is not the oldest sense. The earliest cells must have first acquired an ability to orientate themselves and respond to warmth. But the identification of food and interactions with other organisms entailed the development of this chemical messaging system, and we have inherited it. No wonder smells remain the great triggers of potent memories; they are both processed in the same [ancient areas of our brains](#).

We are still part of this chemical conversation. Biologist Lewis Thomas had a vision of the entire planet self-regulated by its smells. "In this immense organism," he wrote, "chemical signs might serve the function of global hormones, keeping balance and symmetry in the operation of various interrelated working parts." And we're still kept in touch with our love affairs



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and heydays by the scents carried on the wind.

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