

Angel Trumpets are 'Heaven Scent'

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PHOTO CREDIT: William M. Johnson

When brugmansias or angel trumpets come into bloom, the effect is breathtaking. A plant in full bloom is covered with a multitude of dramatic, funnel-shaped flowers hanging down from the branches, as if trumpets were directed at the earth from the heavens above.

It probably would not be a surprise to learn that many of my friends are gardeners. Visits to the homes of gardening friends sometimes take on the appearance of a "house call" meaning I am asked about disease and insect pest problems and even the identification of a mystery plant.

During a late evening on a recent visit, I was delighted to catch a whiff of an amazing fragrance hanging in the air. Like most other gardeners faced with a similar situation, I set off to track the origin of the scent and it didn't take long. It is impossible to overlook a plant that brings such a dramatic

presence to the garden.

The plant producing this distinctive fragrance is known as angel trumpet. Angel trumpets are classed within the Solanaceae family, along with tomatoes, potatoes and petunias,

Angel trumpet is also





known as brugmansia (which is the genus name also). Brugmansias are tropical plants native to north-western South America. They are easily grown in a moist, fertile, well-drained soil in full sun to part shade. There are several species and hybrids of brugmansia that grow as well here.

The brugmansias are large-growing, tree-like plants reaching heights of 10-15 feet in Galveston County if winters are mild. Heights generally will be shorter in parts of the state where the plants freeze back during winter.

When brugmansias come into bloom, the effect is breathtaking. The trumpet-shaped flowers are large (about 9 inches long flaring to about 6 inches across) and can be white, pink, peach or yellow and very showy. A tree in full bloom is covered with these dramatic funnel-shaped flowers hanging down from the branches, as if trumpets were directed at the earth from the heavens above. At dusk the white-flowered types glow. And if the plant is lighted at night, the effect is awesome. (Use a spotlight directed upward below the plant.)

The fragrance of the flowers is most noticeable in the evening when the wind is calm—the soft, seductive scent floats in the air like expensive perfume with light lemony overtones. To stick your nose right in a flower and take a whiff is almost intoxicating.

Brugmansias produce their flowers in flushes or waves through the summer and into the fall (often continuing well into December if the weather stays mild). Some cultivars produce flowers that start off-white then turn a delicious salmon pink. Other cultivars produce white, yellow, pale orange, peach or pink flowers. There are even double forms available and some with variegated leaves.

Brugmansias belong to that wonderful group of plants that are easily propagated and passed from gardener to gardener. It is easy to root a 6-to 8-inch cutting taken from the end of a branch during the summer. Remove leaves from the lower two thirds of the cutting and any flowers or flower buds. Using a rooting hormone is optional, but it can speed rooting.

Stick cuttings half their length deep in a pot of potting mix, sharp sand or a half-and-half mix of perlite and vermiculite. Keep the cuttings in a shady area and make sure the rooting mix stays moist. Rooting generally takes place in six to eight weeks.

Nurseries occasionally have brugmansias for sale, and several mail-order companies offer a good selection of colors (check the Internet). Early to mid-summer is a great time to plant them so they will have a longer time to grow and become established before the arrival of winter.

During the winter, plants growing

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in the ground will need some protection should near-freezing weathers occur. They are reliably root-hardy, however, and mulched plants usually will resprout from the ground in April.

The other plant we call angel trumpet is known as *datura*. *Daturas* are related to the brugmansias but looks quite different. *Daturas* are shrubbier in appearance and their leaves are not hairy and often have a purple tint to them. The young stems are typically shiny, dark purple

The trumpet-shaped flowers may be white, purple and white or pale yellow, and the double-flowered forms are more commonly grown than singles. Unlike the brugmansias, whose flowers hang downward, *daturas* hold their flowers more upright. The sweet fragrance does not permeate the air around the plants to the extent of the brugmansias, but is delightful, nonetheless.

Whether you know them as brugmansia and *datura* or just angel trumpet, they can add a tropical accent to the garden and delight the olfactory senses. Be aware, however, that all parts of brugmansia and *datura* plants are poisonous, so watch toddlers or young children when they are around these plants; just be aware and enjoy these remarkable plants in your own landscape.

