

COLUMNS

Campbell Vaughn: Do you live the fragrant smell of tea olive plants?

Campbell Vaughn Augusta Chronicle

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Key Points AI-assisted summary ⓘ

This fast-growing plant can reach 20 feet tall and thrives in full sun or partial shade.

While it can be used as a hedge, it may grow thin in the middle if planted in too much shade.

Other varieties include the dense Fortune's Osmanthus and the smaller, spiny Holly leaf tea olive.

September is the time of year to start smelling one of my favorite plants in the landscape. When I was in school in Athens, my walk from the dorm to my first period English 101 class, the fall of my freshman year, took me by an area of the sweetest-smelling plants I had ever encountered. Once I started looking around for the culprit, I found a large group of fragrant tea olive (*Osmanthus fragrans*).

When I get a whiff of that sweet smell, it reminds me of my September morning journeys heading to do some college-level book learning.

Osmanthus fragrans grows as a large evergreen shrub or small tree that can reach 20 feet tall. Planted in full sun or part shade, fragrant tea olive is a great addition to most landscapes.

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I have found that tea olive is a fast grower, especially in quality soil with a lot of organic matter. Their dark green semi-serrated leaves resemble the leaves of a holly,

which explains why Osmanthus is sometimes called a false holly. Occasionally, this evergreen is referred to as sweet olive.

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For those who need to differentiate a holly from an Osmanthus, a holly will have an opposite leaf pattern, while Osmanthus has an alternate pattern.

Flowers of all sweet olive species are intensely fragrant, often being compared to the scent of peaches, orange blossoms, or jasmine. The most common flower color is creamy-white, but depending on cultivar, it can vary to include pure white, pale to deep yellow, and orange. While individual flowers are small, the clusters are usually large and numerous enough to be quite showy.

Fragrant tea olive blooms in the same months that oysters are safe to eat, but are the most prolific in September through November. These blooms will persist well into spring. There is also an orange-flowering Osmanthus fragrans that is spectacular when it blooms, but unfortunately only has one real predominant fall showing a year.

Sweet olive is a good accent plant for placing near a doorway, window, or outdoor living area. I tend not to use this type of Osmanthus as a focal plant because it can be a little bland. Occasionally, people will use a hedge of sweet olive, a screening plant, but I normally try and get people to avoid this because there are plants that are way denser than this variety of Osmanthus. And if you do have tea olive as a hedge, only do so if they are in full sun. Fragrant tea olive is a little thin in the middle if put in too much shade.

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Tea olives rarely need pruning since they usually form a pleasing shape on their own. However, they can be pruned for the desired shape. Do note that they are a large plant, and keeping them at 4 to 5 feet will be difficult. When you do prune, try

and hand hand-prune since the leaves are slightly elongated and look rough when they are sheared in half with powered trimmers.

Prune tea olives before growth starts in spring, since they flower on the current season's growth. They can be butchered if they get way too large for a space, but be aware that tea olives that are pruned back severely may take several years to come back into bloom.

Sweet olives are moderately drought-tolerant once established. They are long-lived and virtually pest-free. Occasional disease and insect problems can develop, mainly under stressful conditions or wet feet.

There are a couple of other types of *Osmanthus* that are worth mentioning. Fortune's *Osmanthus* (*Osmanthus x fortunei*) is a dense-growing tea olive that has a more serrated leaf than the *fragrans* species. This is a great plant for a screening in sun or a good bit of shade. This evergreen does bloom a little, but the main feature is its tight form and dense growth. If pesky neighbors seem to be visiting a little too often, the serrated leaf can help detour these unwanted guests.

Holly leaf tea olives (*Osmanthus heterophyllus*) are a smaller species of *Osmanthus* growing between 8 and 10 feet tall and slightly narrower in width. The leaves on these False Hollies have both juvenile and adult leaf forms. The juvenile leaves of this species are very spiny and Chinese holly-like in appearance. Adult leaves are smooth-margined, with a spine only at the tip. This species is great for a formal hedge or a good accent plant with its coarse evergreen texture. There is even a variegated form of this *Osmanthus* that is also very showy.

Get to know your *Osmanthus*. These are great plants that your landscape will appreciate.

