

Please-Touch Plants



ARTICLE AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY NANCY J. ONDRA

We focus a lot on how plants stimulate senses such as sight, smell, and taste, but here are some ideas for plants that create a tactile experience in the garden.

IT'S FASCINATING to watch how people interact with plants. Some are primarily spectators, staying carefully on established garden paths and walking with their hands at their sides—perhaps a legacy of being told “don’t touch the flowers” too many times as a youngster. Others think nothing of fondling any foliage or flowers they can get their hands on to fully enjoy the experience. (Of course, be mindful of plants

that may be poisonous or cause allergic skin reactions, especially if you are in the garden with children.) If you’re usually one of the “hands off” folks, consider reaching out and touching next time you’re in the garden. It’s a wonderful

Above: Touching plants with aromatic leaves such as peppermint releases their fragrance for double enjoyment. **Opposite:** The furry leaves of *Plectranthus argentatus* have a velvety feel.

opportunity to immerse yourself in one of the lesser-known pleasures that plants can offer.

Granted, pretty much any plant can be interesting to touch, even if it’s just to make a physical connection. There are quite a few that I find particularly tempting, though—so much that I wouldn’t ever want to be without them. Here’s a sampling of some of my must-haves for a hands-on garden, in a variety of categories.



A TOUCHY SUBJECT

It's no fun to fill your garden with please-touch plants and then not be able to reach them. You certainly don't want to have to step into your beds and borders, compacting the soil and possibly trampling delicate flowers and foliage in the process, and if you have to go out of your way to get to them, you may not take the time to indulge. Here are three ways to keep these special plants close at hand.

GET EDGY. A pathway without at least a few tempting-to-touch plants is a missed opportunity. They give you a good reason to pause for a moment and simply enjoy being outside and interacting with your garden. Use low-growing furry or fragrant choices along the front of the border, too, so you can easily touch them with your bare toes or bend down to stroke them with your fingers. And don't hesitate to bring a few taller ones closer to the front. Besides getting the plants closer to you, it will give your plantings a more layered look.



Planted near a pathway, tufted hair grass invites passersby to touch its fluffy flowers.

PUT THEM IN POTS. Containers are ideal for please-touch plants. Pots on steps, patios, and decks—and raised planters and hanging baskets, as well—give you the opportunity to site your feel-good favorites where you and your guests will pass by them often on the way in and out of your house.

BRING THEM INSIDE. Including please-touch plants in a cutting garden is another delightful way to experience them. Keep them in vases in your home and office, or share them with friends in hand-held bouquets. You get to enjoy them when you gather them, then the recipient gets to appreciate their tactile attributes when you hand them over. It's a great excuse to get friendly with your favorite flowers and foliage! —N.J.O.

FURRY FOLIAGE

Leaves that are covered with short, silky hairs are perfectly pet-able, as soft as a puppy or kitten and just as irresistible. The hairs also tend to give leaves a silvery or grayish cast, so you get a color bonus along with the pleasing texture. Woolly-leaved lamb's ears (*Stachys byzantina*) is one classic silver-haired choice. The selection 'Big Ears', also known as 'Countess Helen von Stein', has even larger leaves, so there's that much more to love, but I prefer the straight species, because it's more densely furry. It sends up flowering stems and then is likely to self-sow, but that's not a problem; trimming off the bloom stalks provides a good excuse to get touchy-feely with the plants. Some other super-soft favorites include silver sage (*Salvia argentea*), with its broad rosettes of fabulously fuzzy foliage, and silver spurflower (*Plectranthus argentatus*), with velvety, oval leaves that have an elegantly scalloped edge.

FLUFFY FLOWERS

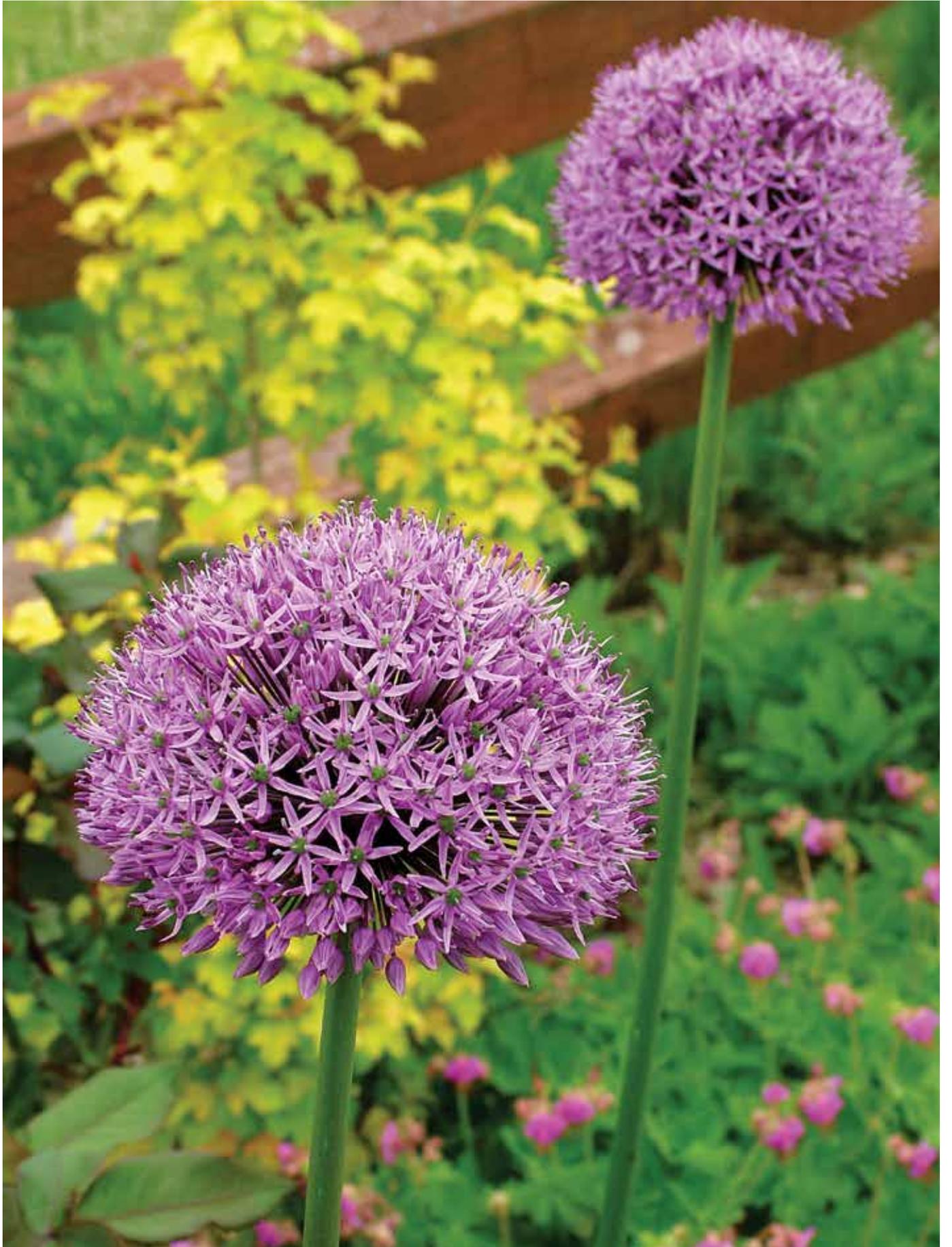
Rabbits generally aren't welcome guests, but you'll want to make an exception for bunny-tail or hare's-tail grass (*Lagurus ovatus*) in your please-touch garden. You'll often see this easy-from-seed annual recommended for children's gardens, but I think adults deserve to enjoy the silky white tufts too! If you can bear to cut the flower stems, you can enjoy the tails all winter as well, in a vase on your desk or end table.

There are lots of other fluffy flowers you can grow, too. Just try to resist stroking the puffy, lemon-sherbet blooms of yellow meadow rue (*Thalictrum flavum*) or the fluffy tufts of blue flossflower (*Ageratum houstonianum*), or tugging on the tassels of dwarf chenille plant (*Acalypha reptans*) or love-lies-bleeding (*Amaranthus caudatus*). I also recommend lining a path—or even just marking its entrance—with some pink muhly grass (*Muhlenbergia capillaris*) or tufted hair grass (*Deschampsia cespitosa*), so you can run your fingers through their airy, feathery blooms as you pass through.

BOUNCY BLOOMS

The ornamental onions (*Allium* spp.) get my vote as top-notch please-pet-me

Opposite: The bouncy, deep-lavender blooms of 'Gladiator' ornamental onion make a striking display in late spring to early summer.



flowers—particularly the fuzzy globes of giant selections like ‘Ambassador’, ‘Gladiator’, ‘Globemaster’, and ‘Purple Sensation’. They’re all soft to the touch but sturdy enough to bounce back from a firm pat, whether they’re in full flower or heading into seed, when they have more of a rubbery, Koosh-ball kind of feel. The bobbing tails of Japanese burnet (*Sanguisorba obtusa*) and dangling lockets of wood oats (*Chasmanthium latifolium*) are also terribly tempting to bat at as you walk by—kind of like cat toys for people. And I haven’t yet seen a grown-up garden visitor who could resist tapping on—or popping—the bouncy green balloons of love-in-a puff (*Cardiospermum halicacabum*)—at least once you give them the okay to play.

CURIOSLY CRINKLED

For a different kind of sensory experience, run your fingers over the rumpled heads of cockscomb (*Celosia argentea* var. *cristata*). They’re velvety soft, but the wrinkles give them a corrugated feel, too. I adore them in the garden and even more in fresh and dried arrangements. Curly parsley (*Petroselinum crispum* var. *crispum*) and crinkled-leaf kales, such as ‘Blue Curled Scotch’ and ‘Redbor’, offer a somewhat rougher, but still pleasant-to-touch surface. The heavily puckered leaves on ‘Lacinato’ or dinosaur kale, as well as on many hostas (*Hosta* hybrids)—‘Great Expectations’ is just one that comes to mind—also have a terrific texture that’s interesting to run your fingers over.

FABULOUSLY FRAGRANT

No please-touch planting would be complete without leaves that release a delightful scent when you rub or brush by them, engaging your sense of smell as well as touch (and sight, of course). Curry plant (*Helichrysum italicum*) is one I hunt for every year for its warm, spicy aroma. Mints are another of my must-haves, and they offer a range of variations, from the cool rush of peppermint (*Mentha × piperita*) to the powerful punch of Corsican mint (*M. requienii*) to the sweet scent of spearmint (*M. spicata*).

My top pick for touchability, though, is the peppermint geranium (*Pelargonium tomentosum*) because it’s practically impossible to resist stroking its large,



The soft but highly-textured flowerheads of cockscomb provide an irresistible tactile experience.

furry leaves and inhaling its peppermint-candy scent. There are dozens of other wonderful scented geraniums as well, from perfumelike rose (*P. graveolens*) to nose-wrinkling pine (*P. denticulatum*). I have many favorite fruity plants, too: lemon balm (*Melissa officinalis*), lemon verbena (*Aloysia triphylla*), and pineapple sage (*Salvia elegans*), to name just a few. And who would want to be without at least one lavender (*Lavandula* spp.) for rub-and-sniff fragrance?

With so many terrifically tactile plants in our landscapes, you may find yourself wanting to reach out to make full contact with them all. It’s probably a good idea to stay hands-off when you’re visiting other gardens, but when you’re at home, don’t hesitate to go for it! 

Nancy J. Ondra is a longtime garden writer and photographer who enjoys growing a wide variety of pettable plants in her Bucks County, Pennsylvania, homestead.