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SEARCH

IMAGE: UNCOMMON SCENTS Green Goddess

Long dominant in men's fragrances, vetiver now reigns supreme with women *by DENISE HAMILTON*



ILLUSTRATION: JOHN BURGOYNE

Vetiver (*Chrysopogon zizanioides*) is a grassy plant from the tropics and subtropics whose roots have been distilled for their fragrant oil since ancient times. Originating in India—where it is known as khus—vetiver grows wild and is also cultivated in Haiti, Java, much of Asia and the French island of Réunion in the Indian Ocean.

Prized by perfumers for its green, earthy, vegetal, woody notes, vetiver is a wonder plant. Its dried grasses, which give off a pleasant odor when sprinkled with water, are woven into mats, curtains and screens, while its deep roots are used by conservationists worldwide to stop soil erosion. The essential oil within is known for healing ayurvedic properties.

In India, it flavors everything from syrups to ice cream, so if Hollywood clubs begin offering \$22 ayurvedic vetiver martinis, I foresee a thriving business. But in the scent world, it's actually the Grüner Veltliner of its ilk—cool, wet, crisp, mineralesque and refreshing, with a hint of saline-infused earth.

It is also a staple of classic European perfumery. Guerlain, Givenchy, Lanvin, Creed and Carven have long made traditional vetiver colognes for gentlemen, though some have weathered reformulation better than others. Due to the fixative properties of the oil, vetiver has been used as a heart, or basenote, in women's perfumes since the early 1920s, but it was usually relegated to a supporting role in favor of jasmine, rose, neroli and ylang-ylang.

No longer. Recent years have seen an explosion of fragrances starring vetiver. Almost every niche line today has one, as perfumers strive to put their stamp on this most ancient and yet timeless of notes. And vetiver's brisk, bracing aspect makes it a perfect unisex fragrance for the 21st century. If perfumery had a smart drug—one that made you focus, breathe deeply, stay alert and invigorated—this would be it.

Vetiver also offers perfumers an ideal palette. It can lay against skin, all cool, gray-green and dusty, like Annick Goutal's *Vétiver*. Or it can turn raw and intense like *Etro Vetiver*, *Maitre Parfumeur et Gantier's Route du Vetiver* and the ultimate fetishist vetiver, *Isabelle Doyen Turtle Vetiver Exercise No. 1* by *LesNez*—a 2009 limited edition that hit like a snootful of damp soil before turning pungent Galapagos green. It quickly sold out, but cheer up—*LesNez Turtle Vetiver Exercise No. 2* just came out last month, so grab a sample while you can.

The scent is clean, green, classic and almost soapy in Creed's classic *Original Vetiver*, politely sedate in *Tom Ford Grey Vetiver* and a juicy green explosion in *Tauer Vetiver Dance*. If paired with warm notes like vanilla, patchouli, amber, root beer, tobacco, tea or fruit, it grows languid.

Natural perfumes like *Ayala Moriel's Vetiver Racinettes* and *Dawn Spencer Hurwitz's Vetyver* are available from their sites. If you have a perfume sweet tooth, try *Miller Harris Vetiver Bourbon*, *Serge Lutens Vetiver Oriental*, *Etat Libre d'Orange's Fat Electrician*, *Hermès Vetiver Tonka*, *Etro Shaal Nuur*, *Molinard Vétyver* or *L'Artisan Coeur de Vetiver Sacre*.

Or if savory is more your thing, vetiver blends well with smoke, incense and marine notes in *Lalique's Encre Noire* (a steal if you buy online), *Chanel Sycomore*, *Moriel Orcas* (nominated for a 2012 FiFi Award—the ceremony takes place just after our presstime) and the *Different Company's Sel de Vetiver*, which evokes ocean-salty, sun-warmed skin.

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Avant-garde perfumer Geza Schoen loves vetiver so much he designed an entire line—his Escentric Molecules 03—in homage to the synthetic molecule etiveryle acetate.

Some forthright versions that approach soli-flores—scents with the essence of a single bloom—are Diptyque's Vetyverio and Vettiveru by Commes des Garçons, while Guerlain's Vetiver cologne is a classic essay in equipoise. One of my favorites, for its plush-pillow intensity, is the cedar, bergamot, cumin, pine and citrus in Frédéric Malle Vétiver Extraordinaire by the brilliant Dominique Ropion.

Don't have \$155 to splurge? Choose an upscale bargain like Parfums de Nicolai Vetyver (\$45) or the woods-cedar heavy L'Occitane Vetiver (\$48). Or there are Jo Malone's Black Vetyver Café and Red Vetyver by Montale—the latter pairs the cool green root with spices, pepper and patchouli.

Raw vetiver, which is sourced by perfumers as avidly as foodie chefs and winemakers stalk their ingredients, varies by climate and soil. Haitian and Réunion renderings have more floral aspects; plants from India and Java are more woody and rooty. Natural perfumer Anya McCoy down in tropical Florida is even experimenting with growing her own.

As with Jasper Johns' White Flag painting, vetiver's gradations reveal themselves subtly over time. Within its humble, homely beige roots, there lies an entire olfactory world.

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In India at least in the southern parts mats used to be woven from vetiver(a name from the Tamil language) and these would be hung as screens to keep the summer heat out.On these screens they would pour cool water to keep the air perfumed and the weather cool.

Posted by: H.N.Ramakrishna | [02/04/2012 at 09:27 AM](#)

I truly enjoy these well-written, informative and insightful articles. One can almost smell the exotic fragrances firsthand. I look forward to every piece Ms Hamilton writes.

Posted by: Taryne | [02/05/2012 at 03:27 PM](#)

I enjoy reading about perfumes but I have to test them on my skin, not wave bits of paper in the air. My body chemistry changes scents - some disappear and others turn rank! I encourage my friends to test perfumes on their inner arm before buying.

Posted by: Mattie | [02/06/2012 at 07:49 AM](#)

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