

# HERBS & PERFUME



*Lavandula Stoechas*

# 2.

*Plate 549. Colour engraved plate of 'Lavandula stoechas'*

from Volume VI of *Flora Græca* by John Sibthorp (1758-1796).

The 966 plates in this work were drawn by Ferdinand Bauer (1760-1826) and engraved by a number of artists including Bauer, James Sowerby, Cornelius Paas and William Westall although the plates are not signed.

Part of the RHS Lindley Library Collection

*I had picked a small bunch of flowers and herbs as a gift for a friend from our community garden. I carried the bouquet in my bag, slightly crushed as I went about my errands. In a shop, I reached inside for my purse and the scent of lavender escaped. Smelling the perfume, a lady behind the desk gasped, 'Oh! I am transported to my mother's house!'*

## EXERCISE 1. Smell - Colour and Words

Walking through and sitting in a garden is a multi-sensory experience. This is explored beautifully in Esen Kay's, 'Making Paradise' exhibition which includes sounds and perfume. This first exercise in book 2 is an invitation to focus on the scent of common herbs typically found in Islamic gardens- smells that we appreciate when cooking (basil, sage, rosemary), or when we brush past or accidentally crush them underfoot in a garden (lavender, mint...)



*Water Mint*  
picked from the  
wild, South-West  
France.

### STEPS:

- 1/ Gather a bunch of different herbs or choose one to focus on. These can be from a garden, bought from a grocery store or found growing wild.
- 2/ With a palette of paint, spend time mixing the colours that you can see in your plants. On the opposite page I have mixed the different shades of green of the leaves of the 'Water Mint' (left) and the pinky, purple shades of its flowers.
- 3/ Now, take a leaf, bud or petal and rub it between your fingers to release the smell. Close your eyes, inhale and try to find words that describe the scent. Is it possible that the herb - with such a recognizable perfume - can actually smell of other things? Does it conjure up images? memories? feelings?

Using a set of gouache paint for children bought in a supermarket, these swatches were mixed using the following colours:

- 1/ Magenta, Burnt Sienna + White
- 2/ White + tiniest bit of Magenta
- 3/ Primary Yellow, Prussian Blue, Burnt Sienna + a small bit of White
- 4/ Primary Yellow, Cyan, + lots of White
- 5/ More Primary Yellow, Cyan, + less White
- 6/ and 7/ Variations of 3, 4 and 5

The colours we find in nature can be both intense and subtle. On each plant we discover a palette that is distinct, harmonious and inextricably linked to its purpose and its habitat. The process of trying to recreate the palette that the herb offers us is a work of appreciation and study, the fruit of which we will apply to further exercises.



4/ Using the colors you've make and the words you've found to describe the perfume of the herb, find a way to combine the two graphically.



## EXERCISE 2. Repetition and Colour Combinations

To get better at drawing, like any skill: cooking, dancing, playing a musical instrument or sport... requires practice. Ideally, this practice is tended to daily (within the limits of the) time that you have available. What is wonderful about drawing is that it is relatively simple to practice anywhere and with humble tools: a pencil and a sheet of paper is enough. Repetition (a word that means 'practice' in the French language) is key to developing dexterity with your tools, deepening your concentration and growing the confidence you need to begin each time. This exercise takes a grid of four, the layout of an Islamic garden its starting point. STEPS:

1/ Fold a sheet of drawing paper in half. you will draw on both the back and the front and now have four frames to work in.

2/ Now make a line drawing of a chosen herb. Remember that before you start making marks, you already have the four edges of the paper that your drawing will be in relationship with, consider them the first four marks of your drawing. The negative space that surrounds your subject and the spaces that you see through are the shapes that help you define the form. By treating the forms as you see as *shapes* - as elements of a pattern that you are tessellating, there is less pressure on an 'accurate' drawing and the possibility of more pleasure in the process.

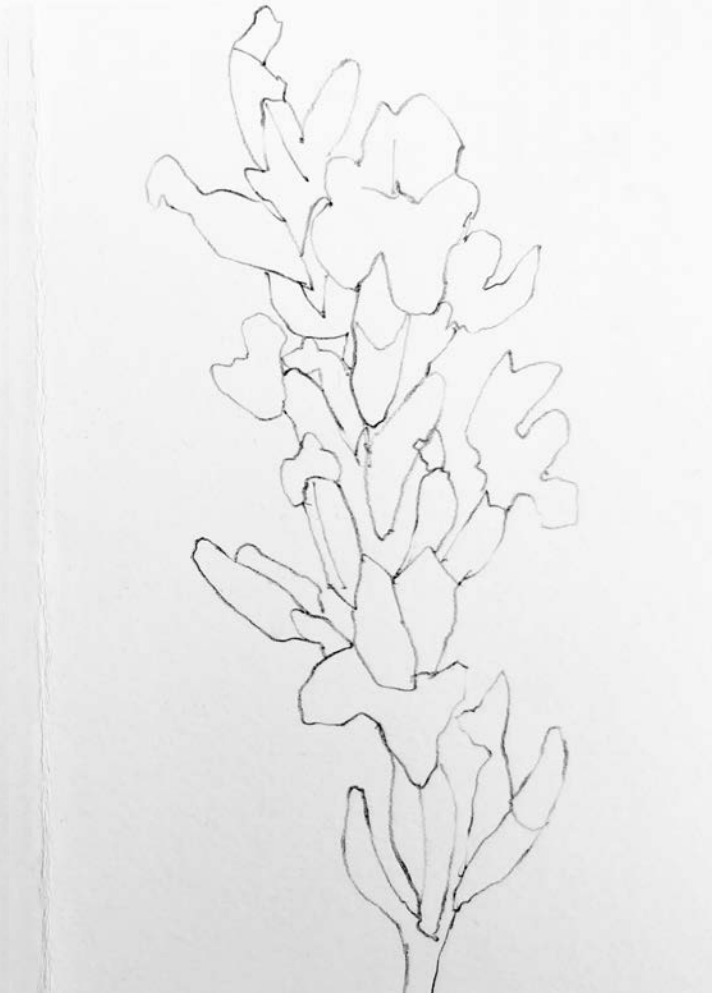
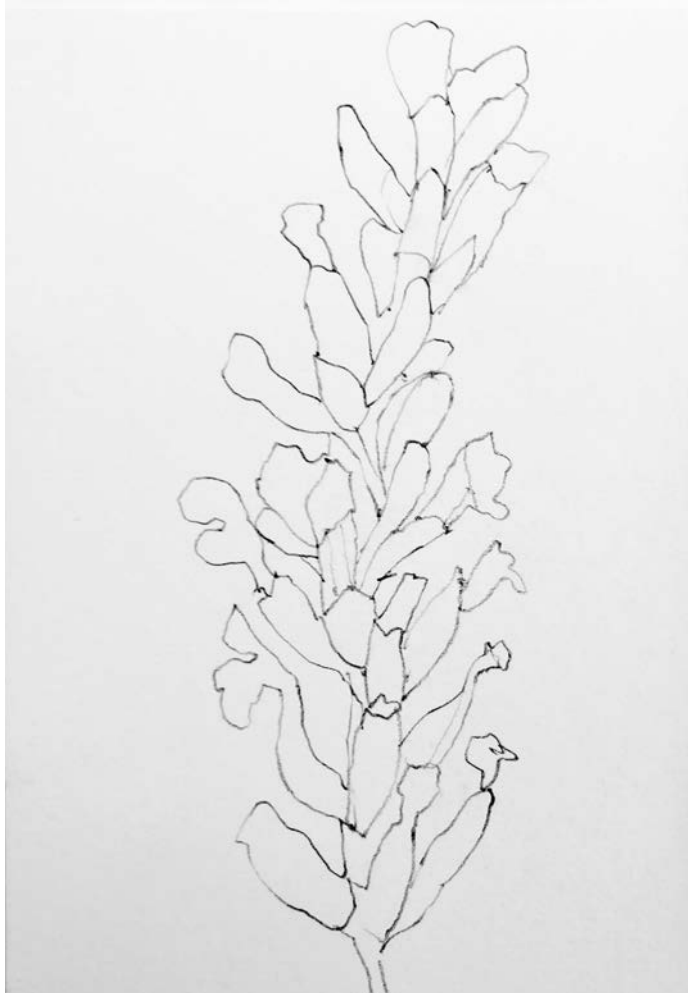
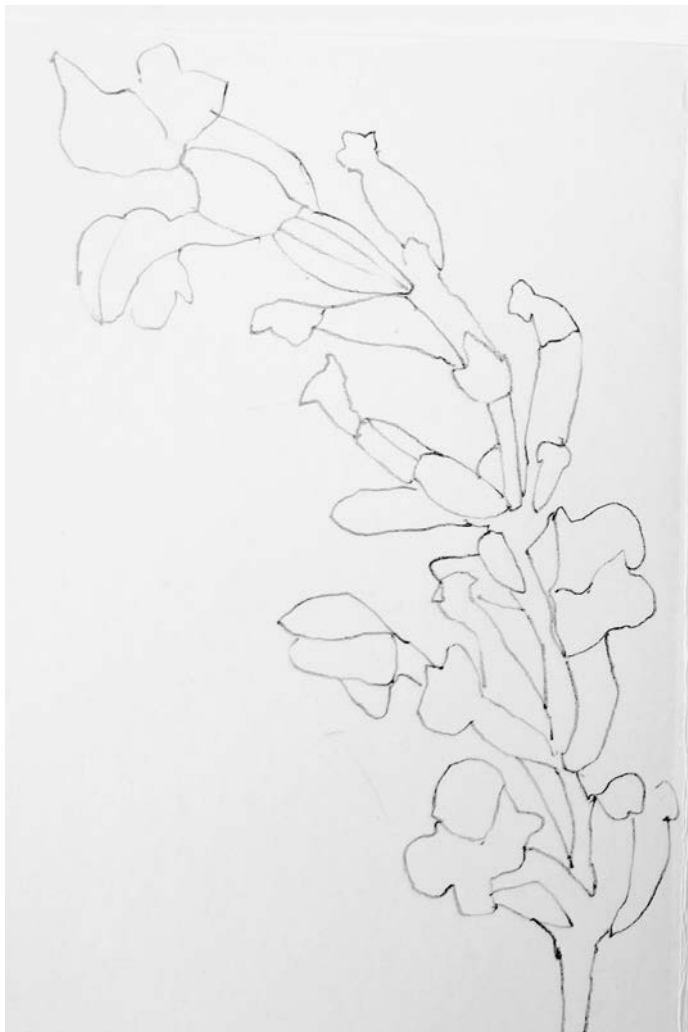
3/ Make three more drawings of the same herb, changing angle each time, so that you fill the page back and front.

4/ Use your line drawings as templates for a series of colour studies and pattern making. Try to use the perfume of the herb to make colour choices - be free and daring.

*Please use my drawings of lavender on the right as tests to colour with your own palette.*

Below: Rosemary studies coloured with a children's graphic marker set.







My painting (opposite) is inspired by a work from the RHS Lindley Library collection that is part of the 'Making Paradise' exhibition, '*Basilic cultivé (Ocimum basilicum)*'. (pictured left) Watercolour on paper by an unknown artist, about 1800. From *Flore du désert: recueil des fleurs odorantes dans un coin consacré à une amie*, 2 volumes.

The anonymous artwork is thought to have been made as a gift to a friend. I was struck by its humility. The artist is thought to be female. This simple herb is presented with such grace and attention, as if it were the rarest of flowers.

## EXERCISE 3. Watercolour

Drawing regularly from Nature leads to a less and less hierarchical appreciation of all the plants that surround us, to the glory of biodiversity. Everywhere overlapping little universes, with their distinct personalities. The kind of close looking we do as artists is nothing other than respect in practice. We can practice, get better at, respect.

Watercolor is a beautiful, but tricky medium and it takes patience to use. STEPS:  
1/ Place your herb in a vase in a space and position that is well lit.



2/ Make a light pencil drawing of the contours of the plant, focusing equally on the negative spaces as well as the subject itself to help you make relationships between the forms.

3/ I made my painting in two sittings, taking care to let each layer of colour dry before I apply the next. Once you start to look closely what first appears as just a green plant, becomes: lime green, pale blue-green, dark swampy green, light yellow

## ARTISTS

Elizabeth Blackadder, Scottish painter (1931- )

Sonia Delaunay, French artist (1885 – 1979)

Charles Rennie Mackintosh, Scottish architect, designer, water colourist and artist. (1868 – 1928)

## COLOUR

Jarman, Derek, *'Chroma: A Book of Colour'* (Vintage, 1995)

St. Clair, Kassia, *'The Secret Lives of Color'*, (Penguin, 2017)

## PATTERN

Seguy, E. A., *Abstract and Floral Designs (Library of Style and Designs)*, (Crescent, 1988)



AGA KHAN CENTRE  
GALLERY



DRAWING IS FREE