

A Sydney florist has created a new signature fragrance, which captures the elusive essence of the exotic *Magnolia grandiflora*.

HEAVEN SCENT

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ONCE THEIR LARGE, MISSILE-SHAPED BUDS OPEN, MAGNOLIA GRANDIFLORA BLOOMS FILL THE AIR WITH A DELICIOUS SCENT. This ancient evergreen tree, which can reach heights of 25m or more, is often found in Australia's coastal parks. Its flamboyant creamy flowers have always defied the perfumer's art, refusing to be distilled as an essence. It's only now that the elusive scent has been captured in a bottle.

For the past 17 years, the flower has also been the emblem of Grandiflora, a tiny boutique florist in Sydney's Potts Point, whose clientele is both A-list and part of the neighbourhood. Locals drop in to greet owner Saskia Havekes daily. Sailors from nearby Garden Island naval base buy small bouquets for loved ones before setting sail. On any given morning, the bouquets pile up in a mountain of beauty, ready to be delivered as thankyou, apologies, declarations of love and fond farewells, while the unfailingly sunny, statuesque Havekes and her team create extravagant arrangements for weddings, parties, soirees and fashion launches that will appear in glossy magazines. She is too modest and discreet to namedrop, but the Grandiflora look — big, natural, exuberant, sculptural and richly textured — is instantly recognisable.

Now Havekes is extending sensory pleasure from sight to smell with the launch of her first signature perfume, *Magnolia Grandiflora* EDP, a labour of love that has taken three years.

Sitting among tall vases and steel buckets brimming with peonies, orchids, roses and natives, Havekes, the >



Saskia
Havekes



Saskia Havekes' new fragrance: Magnolia Grandiflora EDP

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daughter of a ceramicist and a dancer, describes her beloved magnolia as, “My heaven tree – you can literally bury your face inside its blooming centre and inhale its subtle, intoxicating character.” Havekes is also fascinated by its exotic provenance and evolution: “It was originally found in 1703 in Martinique by [Charles] Plumier, who was Louis XIV’s botanist. It is so ancient that its pollination was done by beetles rather than bees, which did not yet exist.”

Havekes wanted to create a unique tribute to the mysterious quality of its distinctive aroma. Given the French discovery of the flower and France’s supremacy in perfume production, it was only right to call on the expertise of a Gallic “nose” to collaborate on the perfume. Enter renowned scent historian Michael Edwards. Like an olfactory matchmaker, he introduced Havekes to Sandrine Videault.

Videault’s dramatic flair and reputation as part-chemist, part-anthropologist and part-artist, made her sought-after in the industry. Her well-known olfactory reconstitution, *Kyphi*, a 2002 perfume for L’Oréal and the Cairo Museum, was based on ancient pharaonic resin cones from Thebes. She also created theatrical one-offs at special events; filling the air with scented metallic bubbles at the Foire Internationale d’Art Contemporain in Paris, for example.

When invited to become involved with the project, Videault was living in Noumea, New Caledonia. She timed her first Australian visit to coincide with the bloom of *Magnolia grandiflora* one November. Inhaling deeply from trees in Sydney’s Centennial Park and the grounds of Government House, she compared the process of creating a perfume to that of telling a story. In the case of *Magnolia grandiflora*, it was not a literal translation so much as a personal interpretation. “Within the petals, I discovered citrus, humidity, watermelon, even the soil itself,” she said.

“The idea was never to replicate nature,” says Havekes, “but rather to create a dance of memory and desire – something you might compare to a portrait of the flower.”

The analogy with art is apt. Weeks later, a first attempt (known in the industry as a “sketch”) arrived. It was the first of more than 80

drafts – delivered in small phials – works in progress that sought to re-create the complexity of the flower’s personality.

“Some made my nose twitch, others made my mouth water,” says Havekes, who confesses to never wearing much perfume herself, perhaps because she is surrounded by the scent of flowers. “Perfume is a visceral experience. Some say scent is the most immediate trigger to memory there is, faster than sight, more resonant than sound. We picked up all the nuances and layers. The differences were so subtle it was almost maddening. Finally, one day, I knew we had ‘the one’”

One being the key. The industry describes this scent as a *soliflore*, a single-flower fragrance built from a complex symphony of notes. Unlike a rose, gardenia or lily, *Magnolia grandiflora* resists the usual processes whereby flowers are distilled to precious liquor. It is not harvested for commercial fragrance production. So Havekes and Videault, working with the Accords & Parfums laboratory in France’s perfume centre, Grasse, created their own version of the species, choosing to evoke the flower when it opens in the early morning.

Magnolia Grandiflora eau de parfum’s top notes are bracing, the middle clean, with hints of greenery and dry wood. The bottom note fuses elements of musk and marine, befitting a tree that makes its home near the ocean. The final formula uses no part of the magnolia, but includes classic natural ingredients: grapefruit, neroli (orange flower blossom), Indian black pepper, New Caledonian sandalwood, a Turkish rose, and finest-quality musk. It is designed to have unisex appeal, being neither too sweet for men nor too earthy for women.

Sadly, Videault died in July after a long illness, just as her work was completed. The perfume is an epitaph to her artistry.

Never one to do things by halves, in June Havekes took one final audacious step, launching her unique fragrance in the perfume capital of the world. Parisian connoisseurs were treated to a typically lavish Havekes floor-to-ceiling installation at an elegant mansion in the Place des Vosges. An early morning raid on the flower market at Rungis provided sumptuous foliage, flowers and mosses to create a romantic backdrop for the luxurious elixir to waft through the air, winning sniffs of approval from knowledgeable noses and triggering the interest of prestigious retailers from Paris to Singapore.

Back in Sydney, the indefatigable Havekes returns to her routine of selecting flowers and foliage at the Flemington Markets three times a week at 4am. She is already contemplating the next challenge – a fourth book of her floral artistry with her partner, photographer Gary Heery – and perhaps a second scent. At this rate, she barely has time to smell the roses, never mind the magnolias. 