

## Madurai Malligai by Dr Uma Kannan – a Story of India’s Jasmine Sambac

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Posted on March 6th, by What Men Should Smell Like in [Perfume Non-Fiction](#). [4 comments](#)

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When I visited [India](#), I expected the smell of sandalwood to be one of the trip’s olfactory highlights. What I didn’t expect was the affection I would develop for India’s native jasmine sambac. Jasmine has always been a favourite flower of mine but I generally prefer the sweet, candied petal odour of jasmine’s grandiflorum variety. I have fond memories of my visit to the jasmine fields surrounding the southern French village of Grasse, where the grandiflorum flowers have been harvested for more than a century.



Jasmine fields in Grasse, France (2012)

In comparison to Grasse’s famous jasmine, which graces the likes of Chanel No 5 and Jean Patou’s Joy, India’s jasmine sambac has a greener edge. The *absolute* extract in my collection of raw materials has a fruitier personality and under GC analysis, I am sure it would reveal higher amounts of cis-3-Hexanol esters that give it its crushed grass notes. Smelling the freshly picked flowers in India, I developed a new appreciation for jasmine sambac and during my time in Madurai, India’s jasmine capital, I became transfixed on the flower that locals affectionately refer to as Madurai malligai. Buying jasmine garlands became a daily ritual in the small South Indian city and I would track the evolving scent of the newly purchased buds as they began to open. The closed buds smell waxy and green, similar to the scent of jonquils and they are rich

with indole, an organic compound, which on its own smells ghastly but in flowers, it gives their odour wonderful depth. When the buds open their scent becomes fruitier, sweeter and the smell of freshly cut grass is more apparent. As the flower decays, instead of smelling putrid after 36 hours, jasmine sambac mystically becomes odourless, losing all scent, good and bad. During this lifespan, the flowers have the uncanny ability to throw their scent like olfactory ventriloquists. Unlike perfumes that smell stronger the closer you get to the source, jasmine sambac extends and retracts its odour. It wasn't uncommon for me to find a pocket of scent in my hotel room somewhere, even though the scent seemed less intense in the space directly around the garland of jasmine. The flower's headspace is constantly shifting, unlike perfume, which generally reclines as it evaporates through its series of top, middle and base notes.

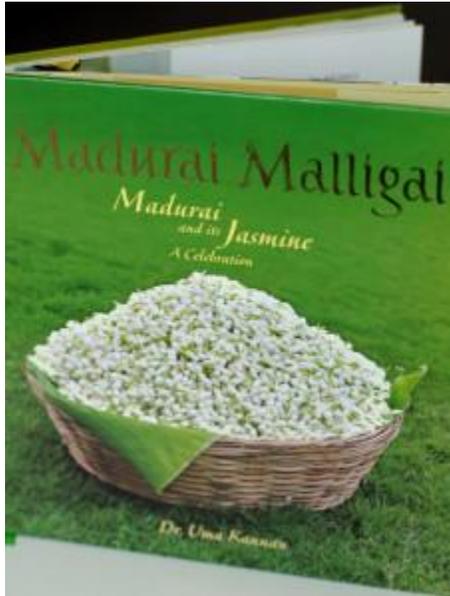


Scenting my hotel room with Madurai malligai

My newfound fascination led me to research the history of jasmine sambac in India. Clearly Madurai was also obsessed with the flower as I found garlands of it being sold on almost every street corner. India's love affair with jasmine dates back as far as 300BC. For centuries it has been grown and offered to the gods. It is also used to decorate the heads of South Indian women and the streets of Madurai are often a sea of moving white flowers framed by long black, plaited hair. If you are lucky you will get a whiff of the flower's sillage as a woman passes by on the street. In India, jasmine is used to celebrate every stage of life, from birth to marriage to death.

I left India with all kinds of scented souvenirs but I wanted something to remind me of Madurai's jasmine sambac. Even if I could take the fresh flowers back to Australia, within 36 hours, they would be lifeless. Through my research I discovered a Madurai doctor that had recently published a book dedicated to the jasmine of Madurai. Her name is Dr Uma Kannan and her book is called Madurai Malligai. Dr Kannan lives in Madurai and is the Secretary of Thiagarajar College and Executive Committee Member of the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage. Her work often links to her passion for the preservation of traditional Indian crafts and skills. So why write a book about jasmine? In her Preface, Dr Kannan writes, "To

begin with I wasn't very clear about this, but after constant visits to the flower weavers, seeing them at work, listening to their stories, and witnessing the early morning ritual of the picking of the buds, day after day, I realized that the jasmine has a special relevance, as the lives and stories of the jasmine weavers are woven into each length of jasmine they string." Madurai Malligai is not just a story about jasmine. It is also about the culture and art behind this amazing flower.



Madurai Malligai by Dr Uma Kannan

Madurai Malligai begins by telling the story of the flower. "There are extensive references to the flower in Sangam literature – the Tamil poems of the period 300 BC to AD 300." There is even mention of jasmine in the Mahabharata and Kamasutra. For centuries the flower has grown in areas around Madurai that benefit from having moist, well-drained, sandy loam soil. Madurai's soil is rich in sulphur, a secret behind the fragrance-causing alkaloids in jasmine – jasmone and alpha-terpineol. Cuttings are planted in September or October and flowering starts a mere six months later. Flowering continues throughout the year, with a peak in summer. On the 6<sup>th</sup> year the plants are uprooted and replaced with crops other than jasmine, giving the soil a year to regenerate.

The flowers are handpicked in the early hours of the morning before the buds have a chance to open. Once open, threading them into a garland becomes a difficult task. As soon as the flowers are picked they are sent to the market and sold. Each day this process takes place before the sun has risen. At the market, commission agents sell on behalf of the farmers. They decide the price based on quality, supply and demand and they track how much money they need to return to the farmers based on their daily sales. Depending on the season a kilo of jasmine can cost anywhere between Rs. 20 and Rs. 300. On rare occasions the price has been known to rise up to Rs. 600. The Madurai flower market is a fun place for perfume lovers. Miniature mountains of fragrant flowers are piled high and the local florists bargain skilfully with the commission agents to get the best price. Although introduced flowers such as roses and tuberose have become strong competition for the native jasmine, it is still revered as the queen of flowers. Dr Kannan writes

that even when compared with jasmine grown elsewhere, Madurai jasmine has four characteristics that help it come out on top.

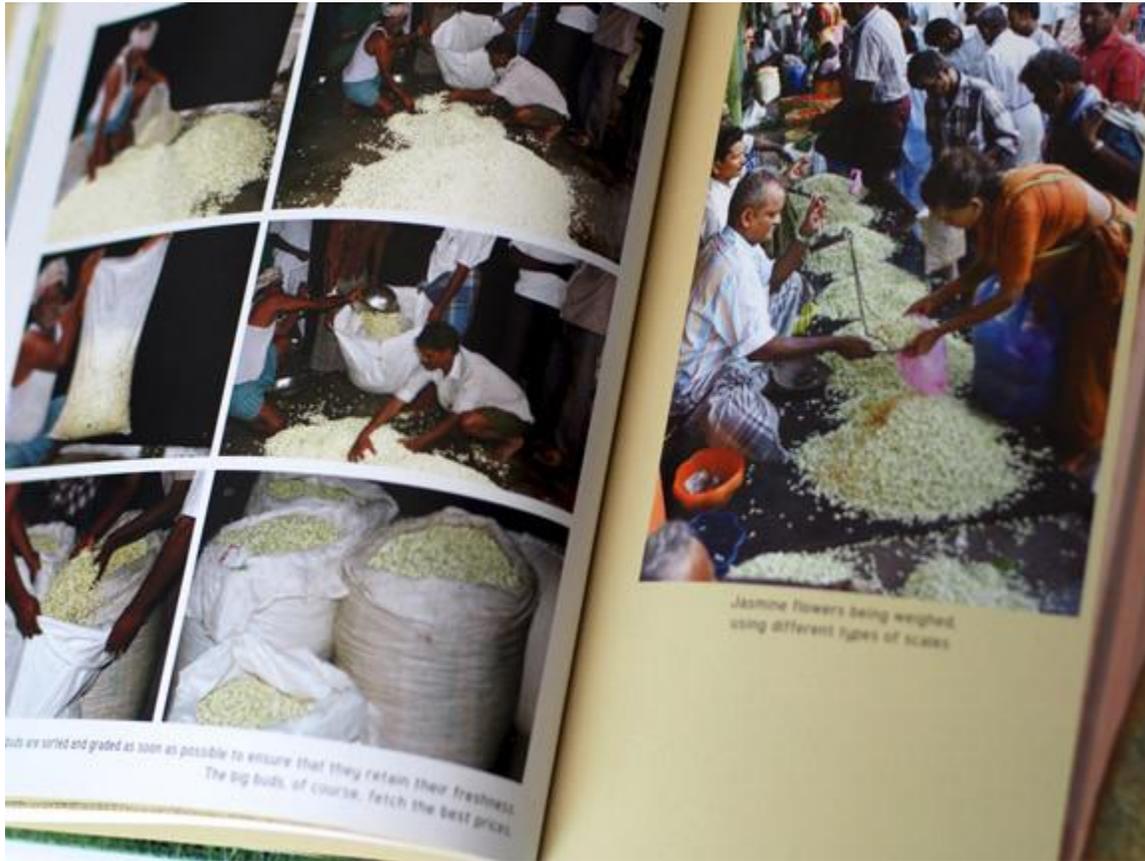
- Fragrance – known to last up to 36 hours thanks to the unique laterite and reddish soils, a distinctive feature of the Madurai district
- Petals – compared to other varieties of jasmine grown in various parts of the country, Madurai malligai has thicker petals, which allow the flowers to retain moisture and delay the process of withering. As a result the flowers are easier to work with, especially for garland weavers
- Colour – the Madurai malligai is greenish white when it is picked in the morning. It turns milky white and then shiny, creamy white in the evening
- Freshness – most other jasmine blooms before or around 5pm. Madurai malligai blooms after 6pm rendering the flowers fresher in the hours before sunrise when the buds are picked

Dr Kannan's book contains biographies of some of Madurai's jasmine sellers, which includes Karthiga, a twelve-year old school girl that spends her evenings weaving and selling flowers. Her dream is to one day be able to "study properly like the girls in the big houses" Subbulakshmi has been selling jasmine for the past forty years and wishes for her son to "go to school and study well." Both men and women sell flowers and curiously it is rare to see the female sellers wearing their craft. The humble sellers line the streets that surround Madurai's Meenakshi Temple and by mid morning, they have strung enough flowers for selling and they keep themselves busy by stringing more. This adds an element of theatre to the street as they weave their flowers in public. I was fascinated to see how this was done and questioned myself as to whether I could do it myself. Once a garland expired I began picking it apart to see how the knots were tied. Thankfully Dr Kannan's book contains basic diagrams of how the weavers do their work and if I return to Madurai, I would try to coincide my trip with a weaving workshop to learn the craft firsthand. Weavers traditionally use dried banana stem to thread the flowers but today, most weavers work with white cotton string. Both the flowers and string are dampened with water, which makes the weaver's work easier and helps preserve the flowers. The *saathaa kattu* weave is the pattern most commonly found and for special occasions, weavers use more intricate weaving techniques. For weddings, the bride's head and hair can be decorated elaborately with jasmine. These are skills that have been handed down by previous generations of weavers and they are the skills that Dr Kannan wishes to preserve because more and more, young Indian women are preferring to dress in Western fashion.

With food playing such an important part in Indian culture, Madurai Malligai would not be complete without mentioning jasmine's connection to Indian cuisine. The book contains a recipe for making syrup from jasmine sambac and there are recipes for all sorts of Indian sweets including jasmine flavoured sticky rice and sago in jasmine scented coconut milk.

Leaving India with a copy of Madurai Malligai wasn't easy. I was very lucky that my hotel in Madurai helped me to get a copy through Dr Kannan's publisher on the morning before I left. I enquired with a number of bookstores in Madurai with no luck and at the time, every online retailer was out of stock. I'm hoping this will change in the future because this is an excellent

book for anyone interested in flowers and perfumery; I already have a list of friends I want to gift a copy.



pages from Madurai Malligai

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**4 Responses to “Madurai Malligai by Dr Uma Kannan – a Story of India’s Jasmine Sambac”**

1.  [Ann](#) says:

[16/03/2014 at 8:06 am](#)

Sounds fascinating! Jasmine sambac is arguably my favorite flower scent. I was a floral designer for years before opening Indigo and I took every chance I had to smell the blooms in the greenhouses.

Would you please let us know if you locate a source for the books? I'd love to have it also.

[Reply](#)

- o  *What Men Should Smell Like* says:

[16/03/2014 at 3:50 pm](#)

I would love to have my own greenhouse of jasmine sambac Ann. I will let you know if I find a supplier of the book. When I published this post, Dr Kannan's website was down, but I see it has come back online. You can find some more information at <http://www.maduraimalli.com>

Best regards,  
Clayton

[Reply](#)

2.  [Jordan River](#) says:

[10/03/2014 at 11:26 pm](#)

Great book find. I think you will return to this place for the workshop.

[Reply](#)

- o  *What Men Should Smell Like* says:

[11/03/2014 at 7:44 am](#)

You should come too Jordan. Then let's go to Bulgaria for the rose festival!

[Reply](#)

