

Frangipani

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Exotic, evocative, mysterious...these are just a few words that hint at the almost ethereal quality of the frangipani. A signature plant of the tropics, appreciating its beautiful blooms is a delight to the senses. As you glimpse throughout the pages of this article, for instance, you will find that frangipani flowers naturally occur in a range of eye-catching hues such as pink, red, white, yellow, and other pastel shades, plus stunning combinations of color.



When you breathe in the essence of these flowers, you will understand why *parfumeurs* often use frangipani in their fragrances. As *Fragrantica.com* describes, “the flowers are often very fragrant” with a palette that includes hints of “soft, fruity, peachy, and creamy on the canvas of the soft gardenia-like aroma” that pairs well with “other tropical fruits, especially coconut.”

Touching the blooms reveals a delicate, feather-light texture that belies the sturdiness of the plant from which those flowers spring forth. The wood of the frangipani tree is white, light, and soft and ideal for making furniture, tableware, and even musical instruments. Native to warm tropical areas in the Caribbean, Mexico, Pacific Islands, and South America, this tropical flowering plant can grow to heights of 30 to 40 feet, with widths up to half that size under the right conditions. Also flourishing in Florida’s subtropical climate, frangipanis make a beautiful addition to many gardens in our region.





By any other name, a frangipani is still a thing of beauty, and over the years, it has acquired a variety of other interesting monikers. Scientifically, the flowering plant is grouped in the genus, *Plumeria*, in tribute to 17th-century French botanist Charles Plumier, known for his work with tropical species. Author Peter Loewer notes that, although the plant was named for that noted scientist, it was first described in 1522 by Spanish priest Francisco de Mendoza.

The common term for the flower, frangipani, has a curious origin story of its own. During the Middle Ages, the patrician Italian Frangipani family was noted for its generosity, since its members were reputed to have distributed bread to the poor during a famine, an act depicted on the family crest. Befittingly, the name, derived from the phrase *frangere il pane*, literally translates as “bread breakers.”

In the 16th century, when Marie de Medici introduced the fashion of gloves fragrant with civet, jasmine, and musk to the French court, it took the rest of the world by storm. Most sources allege that another distinguished member of that family, the Marquis de Frangipani, then created an irresistible perfume that was used to scent gloves, since this helped to mask the odors from treating the leather. Years later, when the fragrant flower was discovered and brought back to Europe, its natural perfume was said to remind people of the scented gloves, so as a reverse homage, the plant was called frangipani. Honoring this tradition, the *parfumeur* Ayala Moriel once released a limited-edition fragrance for women called Frangipani Gloves, which contained “a whiff of frangipani flowers with the leathery-powdery undertones of suede perfumed gloves of the Victorian era.”



Plumeria and frangipani are far from the only terms to describe the plant since the alluring flower is called by a variety of names around the world. From Sri Lanka’s dignified *araliya*, or temple tree, to the Cantonese term which translates as “egg yolk flower tree,” people have coined a myriad of colorful names for the frangipani. Outside of India, where the name, *champa*, originated, that term is frequently used to indicate that certain blends of incense contain frangipani essence.

The frangipani, in addition to inspiring numerous names, is also at the center of many customs. In modern Polynesian culture, women will wear a flower to indicate their relationship status. If she tucks a bloom behind her right ear, she is seeking a new love, but if it’s nestled over her left ear, she’s letting onlookers know that she is already committed to someone special. Visit the Pacific islands such as Fiji, Hawaii, Tahiti, Tonga, and the Cook Islands, and you will find that the people there make colorful leis of these flowers.

Romantically evoking the spirit of the islands, the leis became part of a tradition for visitors to those tropical paradises. Soldiers serving in Hawaii during World War II would drop their wreath of flowers into the water, a practice classic movie aficionados may recall seeing on film in the closing scene of *From Here to Eternity*. If someone’s lei floated out to sea, it was said that the person would not come back to that island paradise; however, if someone’s lei drifted back toward shore, it was believed that the person would return to the island someday.

A highly symbolic, tropical botanical, the frangipani has a fragrance and loveliness that lingers, evoking journeys to far-off lands.