

Pondering the 'smells' of summer time

by Mark Pavilons

'Tears of joy are like the summer rain drops pierced by sunbeams.' Hosea Ballou

I love summer and if I had it my way, it would be sunshine and BBQ all year long.

Ok, the heat we've experienced this summer is a bit much (record breaking in many ways). I still enjoy soaking up the rays, and feeling the warmth on my face. It's like being touched by angels, or something similarly heavenly.

We haven't been away as a family in some time, and now that our kids are young adults, they seem to have their own ideas of 'fun.'

Mind you, we would have been more than happy to take in cottage life for a week or two during the most pleasant times of the year in Ontario.

There are some indisputable smells related to summer that we all know and love. They're imprinted in our brains and remain unforgettable.

Here are some that come to mind: Freshly cut grass, suntan lotion, a sea breeze and of course, sizzling barbecue. A survey of our American friends asked what smell identified America the most, and the most popular answer was barbecue.

A 2014 study showed that we can distinguish at least 1 trillion different odours.

Now, our language doesn't have a trillion words for different smells, but our brains know them all the same. The olfactory nerves do not proceed directly to the brain's thalamus, the gateway to consciousness. Instead, information feeds from the nose to cortical areas to arouse emotions and memories without our awareness. When it comes to smells, people can be influenced and not even realize it.

Our sense of smell, according to experts, is the most primeval and 'volatile.'

Our sense of smell is quite something. It detects, encodes and discriminates among thousands of small airborne chemicals, often at very small concentrations. That's not all, our sense adds an emotional attribute to the objects or events, influences our mood and thoughts, acts as a catalyst in social interactions. In a nutshell, it not only impacts our social behaviour but has been instrumental in human evolution. Here are some other interesting tidbits about our strong sense of smell. Scent cells are renewed every 30 to 60 days. The sense of smell is the only cranial nerve 'erves that emerge from the brain and control bodily functions including eye movement, hearing, taste, and vision 'hat can regenerate.

You can smell feelings of fear and disgust through sweat, and then you can experience the same emotions, according to a 2012 study published in the journal Psychological Science.

Researchers collected sweat from men as they watched movies that caused these feelings. To remain odour-neutral for the sweat test, the men used scent-free products, and quit smoking and using alcohol. Women participants then completed visual search tests, while unknowingly smelling the sweaty samples. The women's eye movements and facial expressions were recorded during this time.

The researchers found that women who smelled the 'fear sweat' opened their eyes widely in a fearful expression, and women who smelled the 'disgust sweat' also displayed facial expressions of disgust.

Chemodetection 'etecting chemicals related to smell or taste ' is the most ancient sense. Women have a better sense of smell than men.

“Summer afternoon, summer afternoon; to me those have always been the two most beautiful words in the English language,” said Henry James. I wholeheartedly concur.

For me, there are literally dozens of summertime scents that take me back.

The smell of gasoline, from outboard motors, always makes me smile. As well, as a teen growing up in Caledon, mowing the extensive lawns on our property was one of my chores. And so, the smell of gas abounded all over the place, from the tractor to the push mowers and chain saws.

While driving around town recently after a rain storm, I could smell the warm, damp, musty air. I grinned from ear to ear. Almost every cottage or cabin smells like that. It's the nature of summer and it has a healing effect. Whenever I smell something damp and musty my thoughts immediately turn to the Muskoka resort my family visited, or those indoor/outdoor carpets at Caribbean hotels.

The scent is unmistakable.

Ok, mold and mildew are bad, but I always associated the smell with the outdoors. As Diane Ackerman put it: “Nothing is more memorable than a smell. One scent can be unexpected, momentary and fleeting, yet conjure up a childhood summer beside a lake in the mountains.”

The aforementioned study is quite right. Smells are personal, and spark emotion. Another unmistakable summertime odor is the smell of a burning fire. You will notice that at almost every campground and in cottage country wherever you go.

Even when you pick up the scent here in the GTA, you know someone is in their backyard gathered around a fire pit, enjoying the weather.

Food, hot off the grill; the unique smell of mustard and other condiments, and you've got a meal for the nose.

Enjoy the smells of summer and embrace the memories!