

People still trot out the old adage that scented candles make dull presents. However, as a gift for someone you don't know well, or as part of a multiple present, they are perfectly acceptable.

Buying them for yourself should be encouraged, as scented candles are one of the simplest ways of infusing your home with a pleasing aroma. They are not as fuddy-duddy as pot-pourri, nor as fuggy-druggy as joss sticks.

Below we assess a range of scented candles that have been tested by a panel of experts who have been smelling things their entire lives.

TOP FIVE DESIGNER CANDLES

Jo Malone Wild Fig & Cassis; £38 for 200g (020 7720 0202; www.jomalone.co.uk).

Although Jo Malone lost its chic exclusivity by opening branches, everyone now knows how expensive it is. Houseguests won't dare defile something so expensive by lighting it, protecting your investment nicely.

The candle gives a deliciously fresh yet spicy bouquet after half an hour. After another hour there is a strong hint of fresh paint, perhaps because it contains paraffin. (Malone's would not tell us the ingredients.) Fresh paint, of course, is not necessarily a bad smell.

Fragrance: ★★★★★
Wow factor: ★★★★★
Originality: ★



Timothy Han Lemongrass, Marjoram and Lavender; £25 for 190g (The Cross, 020 7727 6760; www.timothyhan.com).

Mr Han's candles are made with soy oil rather than paraffin, and blended with essential oils. Paraffin candles, so the soy companies say, contain carcinogens, and are simply dirtier. They need an overlay of stronger perfumes to cover up the petrol pong. Soy candles can therefore be more delicate.

Timothy Han's candle is indeed a gentle thing. After five minutes a clean, musky, soapy fragrance develops. Up close, the smell is more peppery, with the merest hint, said one tester, of marijuana. More than just a pretty smell, it looks good both in and out of its box.

Fragrance: ★★★★★
Wow factor: ★★★★★
Originality: ★★★★★

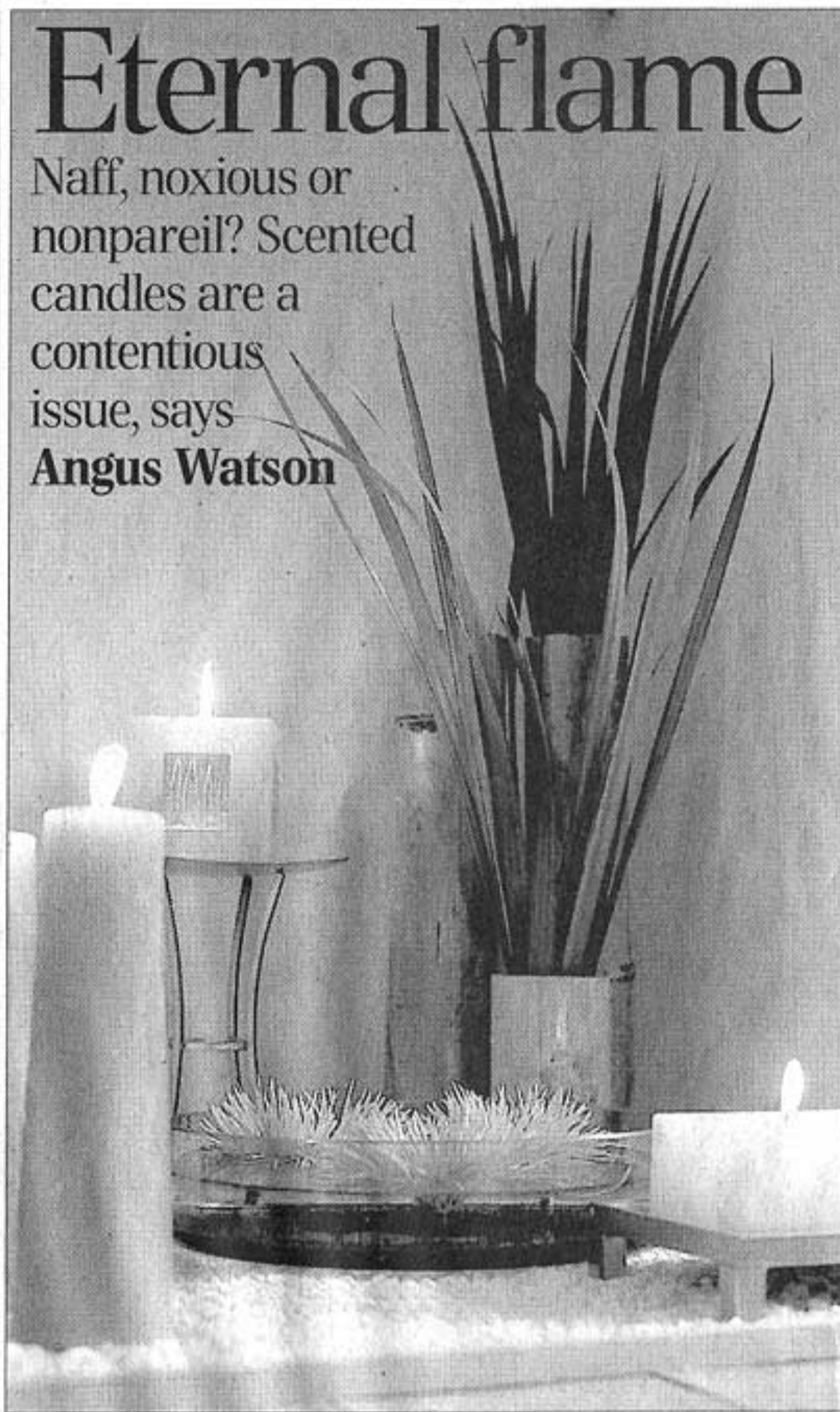


Penhaligon's Temperley Candle; £25 for 140g (0800 716108; www.penhaligons.co.uk).

Penhaligon's (founded 1870) and the

Eternal flame

Naff, noxious or nonpareil? Scented candles are a contentious issue, says **Angus Watson**



Girl power: a US survey reveals that 96 per cent of all candles are bought by women

fashion design label Temperley London (founded 2000) have united to produce a luxury travel collection, which includes this candle.

The wax is a wonderful deep purple and, when melted, it looks like a magician's alchemical pool, albeit one with messy edges.

The box is young and funky, so would suit someone with similar aspirations. The scent – "top notes of red fruits, fragrant middle notes of sultry ylang ylang and winter honeysuckle, and base notes of sweet tonka bean and vanilla" – is really quite nice.

Fragrance: ★★★
Wow factor: ★★★★★
Originality: ★★★★★



HOTTIPS

- In 2000 candles caused 2,000 house fires in Britain; 10 people died. Be careful.
- Burning a candle next to your chopping-board will save you from crying when slicing onions.
- If you need to clean a candle jar, place it in the freezer beforehand. It will be easier to scrape off the wax.
- Store scented candles in the fridge to keep them fresh.
- Trim the wick to ¼in/6mm to avoid fast burning and excess smoke. Pinch off the dead end to the right length.
- To remove wax from clothes, let it harden, place a brown paper bag over it and iron.
- Let the candle burn until it is melted across the perimeter of the jar. This avoids a pothole effect as the wick drills downwards.
- To extend the life of a candle, chill it in the fridge before lighting it.

Marks & Spencer Grapefruit and Ginger Scented Candle; £6.99 for 200g (0845 302 1234; www.marksandspencer.com).

Cleverly, the M&S brand has not been emblazoned across the candle jar. In fact, the store has produced a very elegant candle that is right up there, looks-wise, with Jo Malone's finest.

The box is a little fussy, however, and any gift-receivers will know that you have gone for the budget option. But for your own personal use, this has to be a strong contender.

The smell is a pleasantly understated warm citrus. From close up there is a definite tang of camp-stove that is more apparent than in the other paraffin candles, but if you avoid inhaling deeply with your

nose six inches from the candle, this should not be a problem.
Fragrance: ★★★
Wow factor: ★★★★★
Originality: ★★



Er'go Soy Library Collection, Azalea; £15.95 for 195g from Selfridges (0780 837 7377, mail order available).

Currently only available in Selfridges, this is another soy candle. It is produced by a company in Dallas, where workers apparently "maintain an energy of joy, love and peace". Their website claims that "it brings us great joy knowing that we, in our own small way, are helping to raise the vibration upon this earth."

So we were hoping to hate this candle but, unfortunately, it had a blameless light floral perfume that was very nearly as good as the Timothy Han, and a whole ten quid cheaper.

Fragrance: ★★★★★
Wow factor: ★★★
Originality: ★★★★★

LIGHT UP

- A recent survey in the US found that 96 per cent of all candles were purchased by women.
- Romans invented the modern wick candle, although Egyptians had a similar, wick-less device.
- The ancients used tallow, made from sheep and goat fat. Beeswax was introduced in the Middle Ages. The most common ingredient, paraffin, arrived around 1850.
- Candle use in pagan worship was first denounced by early Christians and then adopted. Christian use has included exorcism and protection from witches.
- Candles were used for black magic, too. An 18th-century grimoire claims that a candle made from human fat makes a handy device for finding treasure in caves.

PICTURES: ELEANOR BENTALL; CHRISTINE BOYD; RED COVER