

My Discovery of Heirloom Roses

By Lynette Metza

I moved to Vancouver from Georgia a little less than a year ago. Though I lived in a nondescript subdivision, every May, I was on the receiving end of the best compliment a gardener can get. My neighbors would step on their brakes well short of the stop sign and creep by my yard and sometimes actually stop to admire my roses. Some asked what kind they were and where they could buy them. To explain why this is so meaningful to me, I must go back 10 years to the warm days, cool nights and low humidity of Southern California.

My gardening interest sprouted in Santa Monica, California, where due to the dry climate, there are very few insects and the occurrence of black spot, mildew, and rust is low. I had read gardening books and magazines full of laments about the difficulty of growing roses and the need for constant spraying and application of various frightening-sounding toxins, I thought I must be an extremely gifted horticulturist to grow beautiful hybrid tea roses in my "almost" organic garden. (I'm an organic gardener the way lots of people are vegetarians. I "try" never, never to use chemical, as opposed to natural, insecticides, herbicides, or fungicides [read red meat]. I compost and depend on that, along with such things as organic fish emulsion and bone meal, as my primary fertilizers, [macrobiotic diet] but I'm not beyond a once-a-year binge of Osmocote [chicken and fish] to get everybody off to a nice start in the spring.) Back to the subject of roses, mine were lovely and I couldn't imagine what all the fuss was about. Then I moved to Georgia.

Within my first two years there, I witnessed my poor hybrid teas limping along under the burden of black spot and rust, their buds invaded by thrips only to survive for the holocaust of Japanese beetles. I was so appalled at the spectacle of hordes of Japanese beetles devouring my beautiful silvery-lavender 'Carl Lagerfeld' roses (and to add insult to injury, indulging in sexual orgies while gorging themselves) that I dug out the plants and threw them away rather than face the yearly heartbreak.

Luckily I had stumbled upon a 'Blaze' rose, a fast-growing, red climber, at a local nursery. I noticed that it remained free of black spot and rust, insect problems, even the Japanese beetles ignored it! I was on to something. A little research indicated that 'Blaze' was one of many older roses with excellent disease resistance and low cultural requirements. I became aware of classes of even older or "heirloom" roses, just reaching popularity, which are being rescued from obscurity and put into use in domestic and commercial landscaping. These roses, almost infinite in variety and attributes, share the quality of not being highly hybridized. Of course, roses do reproduce sexually and have been grown domestically for centuries and therefore human hands have been involved in their breeding. But before the development of hybrid teas, rose breeding was a matter of encouraging the propagation of what nature offered rather than engineering a specific product. The generations of hybridization that have gone into the huge, beautiful tea roses we all love have introduced genetic weaknesses which leave many of them vulnerable to the ravages of disease, insect predation, and less-than-ideal cultural conditions. In the world of genetics, you seldom get something for nothing and in amplifying certain attributes such as bloom size and length of blooming season, we have lost some of the plant's natural vigor and ability to defend itself. Most hybridized roses are, in fact, so weak that they cannot be grown on their own root stock, but

instead are grafted onto a hardier root stock giving the typical "graft union" configuration of the bare root plant. This results in suckers growing up and competing with the hybrid if the plant was improperly placed in the planting hole or is under stress. Note: the phrase "heirloom roses" usually denotes "species" or "old garden roses" and some climbers and shrub roses in culture before 1847. Color in these roses runs the full range of that found in modern roses and many have strong rose fragrance which has been bred out of most modern roses. Not all "heirloom roses" are grown on their own root stock, ask before you buy.

In contrast, most heirloom roses are so called because they are ancestral type roses, are on their own root stock and, in many cases, have been rescued from old gardens or abandoned home sites where they have survived untended for decades.

In addition to low maintenance, heirloom roses have the advantage of pleasing form without pruning. Most naturally grow into a fountain shape of arching canes growing from a single center. I had an impenetrable hedge, 30 feet long, 6 feet high and 6 feet deep, formed by five climbing 'Pinkie' roses. It was a mass of pink in May and bloomed sporadically all through summer until frost.

Many of the old varieties also have the "old rose" fragrance which varies from sweet and citrusy to deeply rich and spicy and has been all but bred out of modern hybrid teas. As a huge fan of fragrance in flowers, I especially love the Bourbon roses, two of which, 'Madame Isaac Periere' and 'Madame Ernest Calvat', are probably the most fragrant roses of all.

The blooms of old roses are as various in size and form as the genus *Rosa* allows. They range from single blossoms like 'Mutabilis' to full, cupped and quartered blooms as in the famous 'Souvenir de la Malmaison'. The blossom diameter varies from 1 inches (my climbing 'Pinkies') to 5 or 6 inches as in the largest hybrid tea roses. Bloom season varies from roses which bloom only for 2 weeks in May to ones which bloom spring through fall.

An added incentive to Southwest Washington gardeners learning about heirloom roses is the presence of Heirloom Roses in St. Paul, Oregon. If you haven't given old garden roses a try, I guarantee a gratifying garden experience is ahead.