

Leschenault de la Tour and His Rose

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Rosa leschenaultiana

The upper reaches (over 6000 feet elevation) of the southern Indian mountain range, called the Western Ghats, is home to a rose species, belonging to the musk rose complex, named *Rosa leschenaultiana*, after a French naturalist and ornithologist, Jean Baptiste Leschenault de la Tour. He found this rose species, among other new plant varieties, like a *Mahonia*, a *Vaccinium* and many others (all of which have his name attached to them) in the forests of the 'Neilgherries and Pulney Mountains' of south India in the early 1800's.

Leschenault (1773-1826) was an intrepid botanical adventurer, traveling with Nicolas Baudin on his sea voyage to Australia (1800-1803), then to Java and other parts of Malesia, India and Ceylon, and later to South America. While many plant species were discovered by him on his travels, the entire plant genus of *Leschenaultia* of Australia comprises a range of beautiful shrubs with flowers in incomparable shades of blue. We saw them in all their glory in the Botanic Garden, outside Perth in Western Australia.

Born in Chalon-sur-Saône, (in Burgundy), the son of a judge, his botanical interests took him all around the world. He married Marguerite Bonin in April 19, 1796 (his wedding certificate found by Dominique Massad). He collected plant and bird specimens in every country, and sent them back to Paris. His herbarium specimens and some of his documents are housed in the National Herbarium (Phanerog.), whilst his other manuscripts are with the Library of Natural History Museum, in Paris.

While in South America he botanised in French Guyana, ill health forced him to return home, where he died in his own home. He seems to have been childless.

He came to India in 1816 as '*inquisitor rerum naturae*' and was made Director of a botanic garden 'Jardin Royal de Pondichéry' in Pondicherry, then a French territory. He was given permission by the British in Fort St George, Madras (now Chennai) to travel in the areas under their governance, in order to make botanical collections. He is said to have sent seeds and plant material to the French Island of Reunion, in the Indian Ocean. He was in India till 1822.

He sent material of the rose species he found in the hills to the botanist Claude Antoine Thory in France, who named it *Rosa leschenaultiana*. Redouté made his drawing of the rose in 'Les Roses', from Leschenault's herbarium specimens.

Ellen Willmott in 'Genus Rosa' writes that '*R. leschenaultiana* has often been called the South Indian form of *Rosa moschata* Mill. But it is a perfectly good and distinct species. It is closely related to the South European *Rosa sempervirens* L., thereby referring to its evergreen character. Its leaflets are 5 to 7, elliptic, oblong, 1.5 to 2.5 inches across, numerous, in large corymbs; the buds very acute; the fruits globose' It was considered a 'geographical form' 'being more robust, with larger flowers and with very glandular leaf petioles, pedicels and calyx'.

The modern view however is different as it is considered to be a part of the musk rose complex (synstylae).

It is now called *R. leschenaultiana*, Wight and Arnot. (Robert Wight also discovered it in 1836 in the same Nilgiri and Palni Mountains). Earlier its nomenclature was either *R. sempervirens* var *Leschenaultiana* Thory (in Redouté, 'Les Roses', 1824) or *R. moschata* var *Leschenaultiana* Rehder (in Bailey 1902).

The distinctive feature of this straggling climbing rose is its violet – purple stems. Once very luxuriant and common in the forests, festooning native 'shola' trees to a height of 60 to 70 feet with long trails of single pure white flowers, faintly fragrant, it is increasingly getting rarer, with the onset of development. In the Centenary Rose Garden in Ooty, (short for Ootacamund, now called Uthagamandalam, the capital town of the district of the Nilgiris, in the state of Tamil Nadu, south India) the hedges on either side of the wide entrance steps, are of this rose species, commonly called the 'Ooty rose'.

In the hills where we live, the Palni Hills, a sister mountain to the Nilgiris (both a part of the Western Ghats) while the rose grows in the inner fastnesses of the forests, we have found it in a location by the side of a road leading to an interior hill village, making it easy to take rose enthusiasts to see this special rose species growing in the wild. We have a plant growing in our garden, clambering over our back verandah.

Viru has hybridized with this species and he has named and registered a seedling, a cross between Rêve d'Or and *R. leschenaultiana* as 'Leschenault de la Tour' to honor and memorialize the Frenchman who traversed our hills in the early 1800's.

Taxonomical Description:

Rosa leschenaultiana Redoute & Thory ex Wight & Arn. Prodr. fl. Ind. orient. 301. 1834; Wight, Icon. pl. Ind. orient. t. 38. 1838; Hook.f. Fl. Brit. India 2: 368. 1878; Bourne, E.T. Tab. ined. t. 29. 1910; Sauliere, Pl. Pulney 8. 1914; Anglade, Tab. ined. t. 1585. 1919; Gamble, Fl. Madras 1: 444(315). 1919; Fyson, Fl. S. Ind. hill stat. 200. t. 152. 1932; Boulenger, Bull. Jard. Bot. Etat 9(4): 237. 1933; Matthew, Ill. Fl. Palni hills t. 262. 1996.

R. moschata Herrman, Diss.. Bot.-Med. Rosa 15. 1762,

var. *leschenaultiana* (Wight & Am.) Crepin, Bull. Soc. Roy. Bot. Belg. 1869-1882.

Spreading, scandent, armed shrub; prickles hooked. *Leaves* alternate, odd-pinnate, to 10 x 8 cm, chartaceous; petiole 2 cm; stipules adnate to petiole base, to 1.5 cm, glandular; leaflets 3 pairs, sharply serrate; terminal leaflet oblong-ovate, to 6 x 3 cm, petiolule 1 cm; laterals oblong-elliptic, to 4.5 x 2.5 cm, subsessile. *Flower(s)* solitary or in a few-flowered corymbs; pedicel to 3 cm. with copious glands. *Calyx* flask-shaped, 4 mm wide, very glandular; lobes 5, lanceolate, foliaceous, to 2.5 x 0.6 cm, glandular, reflexed with age. *Corolla* white, very showy, to 7 cm wide; petals 5, obcordate, 3 cm wide, imbricate. *Stamens* a; filaments 1 cm. *Pistils* a, superior. *Ovary* 1-celled; ovules 2, pendulous. *Fruit* (cluster of achenes) ovoid; pericarp bony, enclosed in the accrescent fleshy hypanthium; seed with thin testa; endosperm O.

Upper Palnis (1500)1700-2300 m: wayside, bushes, forest border, etc. Very common. Extensive armed straggler to 8(10) m, forming impenetrable thickets. *Flowers* white, very showy. 7.5 cm wide. in peak during March-June. Ripe(red) *fruits* by August.

Distribution: Peninsula (Western Ghats of western peninsular India.))

We are indeed very happy to launch this rose in honor of Jean Baptiste Leschenault de la Tour. It is singularly appropriate that this rose is doubly French, with Reve d'Or, one of the best known of French roses as the seed parent, and *Rosa leschenaultiana* as the pollen parent.

The new rose hybrid is virtually a larger version of that famous white Noisette, 'Lamarque', again French.

It bears beautiful globular white flowers, displaying an exquisite medley of petals, illuminated by the light gold of the center, wafting a soft fragrance, and happily, remontant. This climbing rose has elegant light green foliage and climbs easily 3 to 4 meters.

In our opinion, a fitting tribute to the sadly brief, but prodigiously rewarding life of this plant explorer, a life cruelly cut short in its prime. But what a life! A brief but brilliant meteor flashing across the startled skies of India, Australia and the West Indies.