

Robert Harkness

Nurseryman and breeder of some of the most popular roses who turned his family business into an international concern



'Ena Harkness'

For gardeners one of the joys of the postwar years was the opportunity to grow ornamental plants again, after the inevitable focus on vegetable gardening and digging for victory. The rose "Peace" became a household name along with "Ena Harkness", a fragrant, velvety-red hybrid tea variety, unfading, spiral centred, and soon to become one of the most popular roses to have been raised.

It came from Harkness's rose nursery in Hitchin, Hertfordshire, an old family of growers of whom Robert Harkness was the most recent scion. Harkness saw the nursery through times of great change in the trade and in the nation's gardening preferences.

R. Harkness and Co started out in Yorkshire in 1879 and 'Mrs Harkness' (1893) was one of their first successes. In the 1900s the firm moved to Hitchin, but the breeding programme for which it became famous was begun in the 1940s by Jack Harkness (1918-1994). The immortalised Ena was Jack's uncle's third wife.

'Ena Harkness' was bred by an amateur rose breeder, Albert Norman. In 1945 it received the National Rose Society's Gold Medal and Clay Cup for Fragrance. Harkness released the rose commercially in 1946. It was to become one of the firm's signature plants along with 'Compassion' (1972) and 'Margaret Merrill' (1977).

Robert, the second child and elder son of Jack and Betty Harkness, was born in 1951, his father's birthday and the day of the National Rose Society's Great Summer Show.

He grew up in Letchworth Garden City, and attended the Quaker Friends' School at Saffron Walden, where he excelled in sport. At 16 the school selected him, an outstanding pupil, to spend a year as an exchange student in a sister Quaker school in Pennsylvania, where he made many friends and came home a resourceful, self-reliant young man.

After school he undertook horticultural studies in the Netherlands where he mastered German and French as well as Dutch (his gift for languages was to serve him well in later life as a nurseryman on an international stage). Returning to England, he opened his own nursery, marketing and supplying roses wholesale to other growers through the early 1970s.

Harkness's interest in sport had led him to develop a love of sailing, despite an early yachting experience when the skipper had tied him to the mast in heavy weather to prevent him falling into the sea. As a mid-career gap, he found work out of Gibraltar crewing a boat to St Lucia, then spent many months in and around the Caribbean. Eighteen months later, he re-entered the rose world, this time returning, without pressure from his father, to the Harkness firm. His younger brother Philip joined shortly afterwards.

Under Jack's tutelage he now learnt the mysteries of rose breeding, an occupation requiring real commitment because it demands so much patience and investment in the future: it takes at least nine years to breed a new rose and bring it into production. When the time came for the senior generation to retire in 1989, Robert and Philip were ready to take the reins. Robert went on to serve as president of the British Association of Rose Breeders from 1999 to 2002 and to be a judge at trials of new roses throughout the world.

Robert Harkness's success as a businessman drew on his ability always to stay ahead of the game, to come up with unusual ideas that really worked. He saw that the trade in roses was moving from exclusively bare-rooted winter sales via mail order to container-grown summer sales from garden centres, and adapted to it. Today 90 per cent of roses are container grown and nurserymen must develop varieties that look attractive in a container.

He was absolute in his desire to see new roses which, unlike older varieties, needed neither pesticides nor physical support to keep them healthy. Pesticides were not used in the breeding programme.

Since the Second World War, rose sales in Britain have fallen from 35-50 million a year to only 12-14 million and the number of UK breeders has shrunk to a handful, fast moving even internationally towards just a few huge players (Meilland in France, Kordes and Tantau in Germany, Weeks in America). In the face of this, Harkness trod a generalist road, not concentrating like David Austin on a highly specialised race of their own roses, or in old-fashioned varieties like Peter Beales, but raising roses in most modern habits: Hybrid Teas, Floribundas, Patio roses, Garden Party roses and others. Their garden centre was sold to Wyevale to allow them to concentrate on roses.

Robert Harkness himself, linguist and Europhile, moved for the last years of his life to Le Tignet, near Nice, where he worked on international sales to America and Australia as well as Europe, while his brother Philip concentrated on the British trade. Both of them shared the vital work of breeding, releasing a small number of new roses at the Chelsea Flower Show every year.

The EU single market opened up new competition and a greater opportunity to sell to other countries, especially into an expanding EU membership; Robert Harkness was eager to take advantage. Other tasks included the pursuance of breeders' rights, necessary to ensure a fair return from the nine years of development required for a new variety, and the trademarking of every new variety at high initial and annual expense. He also undertook the licensing which permitted the legal propagation of trademarked Harkness varieties by wholesale growers.

Robert Harkness is remembered in the nursery trade as an imaginative businessman, handsome, able to command a room full of people, and always ready with a bold idea to solve a problem. He leaves a wife and one daughter.

Philip Harkness has three children. None of them is under any pressure to carry on the 130-year old family business, but it may happen.

Robert Harkness, rose breeder, was born June 29, 1951. He died of cancer on November 8, 2012, aged 61

The Times, 1. Dezember 2012