

Rustlers give old roses new life



Master gardener and frequent rose "rustler" Judy Dean discusses the unique characteristics of a heritage rose growing at Altaville Protestant Cemetery in Angels Camp. (Benjamin Hicks, The Union Democrat/copyright 2005)

Judy Dean rarely drives anywhere without a shovel, plastic bag and her red-handled pruning shears.

The Mokelumne Hill woman is a "rose rustler" one of several in Calaveras and Tuolumne counties. Despite the moniker, what she does is perfectly legal and, in fact, noble.

Dean and others like her are dedicated to finding and preserving roses dating back to the 18th and 19th centuries.

There may, at one time, have been 6,000 of the so-called "heritage roses" hybrid offspring of the 100 to 220 original rose species known to mankind.

Only 2,000 heritage rose varieties have been found, named and preserved.

"That means there are 4,000 in the world that have either gone extinct or are hiding somewhere," Dean said. "We want to find them."

They are prized because of their simple beauty, hardiness, disease resistance and rarity.

Dean is quick to point out that she always gets permission to go onto a property before taking a cutting or digging up a plant.

Some of these heritage roses once bloomed and thrived in family gardens, mine sites, cemeteries and public buildings throughout the Mother Lode.

Some were brought by pioneer families and missionary priests.

Dean said there is even documentation that some of the roses were bought by mail order and delivered by wagon and rail.

Even Mother Lode cemeteries now devoid of any vegetation were once enlivened by gorgeous, fragrant roses. Years of neglect and the systematic spraying of herbicides have killed many of these roses, said Fred Boutin of Tuolumne, who also collects old roses.

"There are no more old roses in Jamestown or Sonora, but there are nice ones at the Odd Fellows and Masonic cemeteries," Boutin said.

Before retiring and moving to Tuolumne, Boutin was a botanist with the Huntington Botanical Gardens near Los Angeles. His interest in roses was piqued while attending college in Riverside.

He said he rode a bicycle past an older home with a lovely rose hedge. One day, he asked for a cutting of the hybrid, called perpetual.

"Hybrid perpetuals were one of the most important exhibitor roses in the 1920s," he said.

Boutin went on to become one of the organizers of the Heritage Rose Society. Through his efforts, the old Sacramento City Cemetery is now filled with heritage roses, many of which came from Boutin's collection of cuttings.

Dean calls Boutin and Angels Camp gardener and heritage rose lover Rusty Rolleri her inspirations.

Rolleri, a long-time member of the Calaveras County Garden Club and a member of the Altaville Cemetery Board, is dedicated to saving Calaveras County's old gardens.

Rolleri encouraged Dean and two other women to find, document and restore 75 roses in Altaville's Catholic and Protestant cemeteries as a project aimed at earning their Master Gardener certificates.

Dean has also found old roses growing in brambles along county roads, hidden among overgrown shrubs at old houses and among trash piles at abandoned buildings and gas stations.

"Sometimes they are just a gesture of a bush, but still able to survive," Dean said. "These are the roses that I want to preserve."

No matter the season or the weather, Dean keeps an eye out on her travels in the Mother Lode for forlorn rose bushes which have survived year after year without attention.

Dean and Boutin call the heritage roses historical artifacts, as valuable to preserve as old buildings. That's why they take cuttings from roses and plant them in gardens where they can again thrive and be seen.

"I'm going to stop at four or five places on the way home to take cuttings. You never know when a property might be bulldozed or the rosebush sprayed with Roundup," Dean said,

referring to a commonly sold herbicide.

She has learned from experience that waiting one day too long to get a cutting means coming back to find a house or building razed and its garden decimated by trucks and tractors.

"You gotta go now or you might not get another chance," she said.

She and her husband once stopped at a house in Angels Camp at 7 p.m. on a Sunday on their way home to Mokelumne Hill. Dean got permission to uproot a rose hybrid thought to have originated between 1850 and 1870 before the homeowners cut it down to make way for a lawn.

Over the last several years, Dean, Roller and two other women Lynn Storm of Valley Springs and Bev Vierra of Rail Road Flat have identified old roses and taken cuttings from 77 sites in Calaveras, Amador and Tuolumne counties. They are now preserved in their own gardens.

On her own, Dean has been to 30 to 40 more sites and taken cuttings.

At her 12-acre property in Mokelumne Hill, Dean has 500 roses in the ground most of them heritage strains. All are documented and mapped.

She also has a nursery of cuttings being started in pots. Those she gives away to people who want an heirloom rose for their garden. She also brings samples to her lectures to garden clubs.

In 2003, Storm, Dean and Vierra created a book called "Field Report of Rose Characteristics."

The book standardized terms for describing and documenting the discovery of a heritage rose. Copies have been sold to enthusiasts worldwide.

Earlier this month, Dean went to New Zealand, where she was invited to talk about field reporting on heritage roses at the 10th International Heritage Roses Conference.

She has also talked to garden clubs, service clubs, church groups, school groups anyone who will listen. She wants as many people as she can to realize how important it is to save these roses from extinction due to development.

"We are just the current caretakers of these roses. It is important that future generations be able to see them as well," Dean said.

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