

Book review

Roses in the Fire of Spring: Better Roses for a Warming World & Other Garden Adventures

by M.S. 'Viru' Viraraghavan and Girija Viraraghavan

Review by Charles Quest-Ritson



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Better Roses for a Warming
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by M.S. 'Viru' Viraraghavan
and Girija Viraraghavan

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Come, fill the Cup, and in the Fire of Spring
Thy Winter Garment of Repentance fling:
The Bird of Time has but a little way
To fly - and Lo! the Bird is on the Wing.

[Omar Khayyam, 1048 – 1131, translated by
Edward Fitzgerald, 1809 – 1883, and first published in 1859]

This is a magnificent book that will be of interest not just to the authors' many friends but to everyone who is involved in the history of roses and intrigued by the future direction of rose-breeding. It is also a testimony to a long and happy marriage between Viru, the shy and studious rose-breeder, and Girija, his super-intelligent, gregarious wife.

Viru Viraraghavan is one of those people who seem to have been born with a fine paintbrush in his hand for the transfer of pollen to pistils. It is clear that, from an early age, he has been a compulsive hybridiser. No matter what genus he looked at, Viru saw infinite possibilities for its improvement. Gerberas were the subject of one of his early hybridisation programmes and there are pictures of some of his hybrids in this comprehensively illustrated book. He was also happy to sow open-pollinated seed of magnolia hybrids to see how their seedlings would turn out. And he hybridised the flowers of some enormous plants of *Rhododendron arboreum* subsp. *nilagiricum* that grow wild around their house at Kodaikanal with complex hybrid pollens from the American *Rhododendron* Society. Then he

would return in the autumn to collect the seed.

Roses have always been his great love, ever since his father gave him a collection of China roses that he had found during his travels. Viru was influenced by the Bihari nurseryman B.S. Bhattacharji, who specialised in roses and had strong views – which he set out in his book *Rose Growing in the Tropics* – on what should be grown in India. They chimed with Viru's own observation that English and American roses, bred to withstand cold winters, were not suitable for tropical or subtropical climates. Viru's aim has always been to breed roses that flourish in climates – even in truly tropical situations – where other roses will not adapt. In his early years, he chose a mixture of Tea roses, China roses, Noisettes and modern roses for his crosses. And he had some successes among the seedlings that he carefully selected for their performance in the savannah-type climate of southern India.

As early as in 1965, Viru saw the possibilities inherent in *Rosa clinophylla*, a denizen of near-tropical swamps and marshes in

Assam and Bangladesh, but he did not receive a plant of this species until 1985. No other rose grows in water but Viru understood the enormous promise of its hybrids as roses for tropical regions with high humidity. And not until 1991 was he able to collect *Rosa gigantea* from Manipur; in the event, this was the species that brought him the most extensive and speedy results. And it is his *Gigantea* hybrids that offer a subtropical alternative to the swathes of modern roses introduced by breeders in the northern hemisphere. The hardiness and adaptability to different climates of these new hybrids is inevitably unknown when they are first introduced, but it is a surprise to find that they are often hardy in such climates as cool, wet England where one might have supposed them too tender.

Viru retired early, in 1980, to dedicate himself to rose-breeding. That was when he and Girija bought their present house at Kodaikanal in the Western Ghats, at an altitude of 2,000 metres, with a monsoon-influenced, subtropical highland climate – now a place of pilgrimage for the many friends and rose-lovers they have met in the course of their travels. At one point, the Viraraghavans bought a farm to test their roses near the southern town of Hosur in Tamil Nadu, which has a tropical savannah climate. But it was difficult to manage at a distance and eventually they had to sell it when the water supply failed, due to excessive

extraction by local farmers and industries. On the other hand, they recently acquired a property in Pondicherry, where the hot, humid climate will make a suitable test-ground for Viru's hybrids of *R. clinophylla*.

One extraordinary fact that emerges from this book is that India's horticultural power couple, so international in their outlook, did not leave India to travel abroad for the first time until 1991. And yet they have a deep understanding of other cultures, history, religions and food. Both of them have English as their mother tongue. Both come from families that contributed much to the service of India, whether before or after independence in 1947. Girija's grandfather Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan was an Oxford don, a Professor of Philosophy who was elected Vice-President of India in 1952 and President from 1962 to 1967. In 1963, Queen Elizabeth gave him honorary membership of the British Royal Order of Merit, whose members are restricted to 24 in number.

The bigwigs of the WFRS did not know of Viru's work – and its importance – until Helga Bricchet heard him speak at a local conference in Jaipur in January 2000. "Why was Viru's work with *R. gigantea* and *R. clinophylla* not better known?" she asked. Helga was, at that time, president of the WFRS, and promptly invited Viru and Girija to speak at the World Convention in Houston, Texas, four months later. Such was the success of their presentation at that convention that the Viraraghavans'

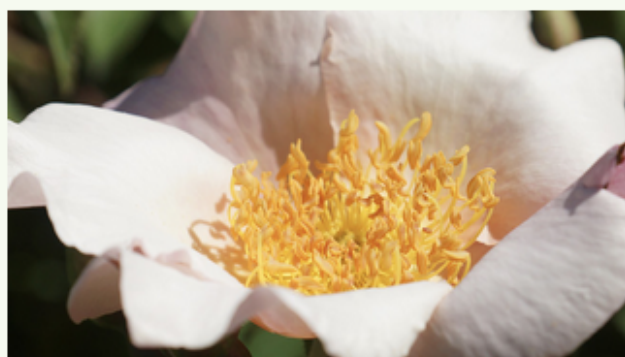
fame and renown soon echoed all through the world of roses. Now they are keen travellers, always curious, always alive to things of beauty or cultural interest. Much of the book is taken with their visits abroad after their "discovery" in 2000. They are indefatigable garden-visitors with an impressive knowledge of plants of every sort. They attend as many of the international rose conferences as possible and join in every activity; everyone knows them and loves them. And they give thanks for the friendship of rose-lovers and garden-owners that their late-flowering fame has brought them.

This is a long book, with much of interest not just to rose-lovers but to readers who dream of travelling to see plants and gardens all over the world. Readers unaccustomed to the world of Indian books may claim to recognise small but irritating faults but everyone else will know that the authors, their editors, the printers and publishers are all to be congratulated for the high standards of this publication. It is beautifully produced, with woodcuts of flowers and leaves at the page corners. It is large, heavy, and a joy to open at any page, though best read through from the beginning as a horticultural biography – the autobiography of two passionate plant-lovers. The focus is always on their roses, but Girija's acute intelligence and sense of humour bubble up at every point. She misses nothing, finds beauty in almost everything. And they have been members for many years of the Royal Horticultural Society in England, the Rhododendron, Camellia and

Magnolia Group and the International Magnolia Society, based in the United States.

"Apart from roses," Girija writes, "we are interested in all plants, and grow a variety of trees and shrubs. We have, over the years, made a collection of rare plants from across the world. Our climate is ideal for magnolias, camellias, some rhododendrons and many other subtropical trees." They have travelled to Sikkim to attend a Rhododendron conference and to see species in the wild; Viru's description of the beauty and abundance of the plants they saw is exhilarating – white forms of *Rh. ciliatum*, pink *Rh. glaucophyllum*, forests of *Rh. campanulatum* and very tall plants of the giant-leaved *Rh. grande*. Magnolias are another interest: they managed to devote a trip to Thailand to see subtropical species that are almost unknown in Western countries – if you would like to make the acquaintance of *Magnolia sirindhornae*, *M. moulmainensis*, *M. rajaniana* or red-flowered *M. garrettii*, this is the book for you.

Orchids and lilies are among their other special interests and the book mentions their encounters with rare species in these and many other genera that they have encountered in the wild. They recall the thrill of finding *Rosa hirtula* at Hakone in Japan, for example, and deciduous *Rhododendron nipponensis* on Mt Fuji. Their knowledge of plants, their botany and their cultivation is gobsmacking – and yet, they carry their learning lightly so that their conversation is always a delight.



1. 'Amber Cloud' [Viraraghavan, 2006] at Santa Maria, 2022
2. 'Ahimsa' syn. Orient Silk [Viraraghavan, 1996]
3. 'Frank Kingdon Ward' [Viraraghavan, 2012] at Magliano Sabina, 2022
4. 'Rebecca's Choice' [Viraraghavan, 2012] in Emanuele Dotti's garden at Magliano Sabina, 2022

Images: Viraraghavan

And the conversational style of the book is underpinned by great knowledge.

But, of course, it is a book for rose-lovers and for all who have met or listened to Viru and Girija lecturing at international conferences. The narrative is driven by enthusiasm and enjoyment of people, places and plants. There is never an unkind word about any of them. Girija is invariably full of praise and appreciation. There is an Appendix to the book that lists all the roses they have bred and introduced. Each has a full description and many are photographed as illustrations. The Viraraghavans are most generous in the way that they name their roses for their friends and give specimens to gardens, nurseries and institutes all over the world. And this also makes good sense because it enables them to discover how their hybrids will fare in different climates and conditions, and serves to make them better known.

There is only one way to sum up this book: buy it!