

GREAT ROSES FROM THE PAST

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In this modern world with high pressure advertising and a craze to have the latest, whether it is in roses or anything else, there is a very strong tendency to forget the virtues of the plant stalwarts of the past. Recently at the instance of a very well known botanist, Fr. K. M. Matthew, I attempted to search for the old roses in Kodaikanal. The results were quite an eye opener. More than 60 varieties have survived in the gardens of this small town, despite neglect and age. While the climate in a hillstation is favourable for gardening, the usual pattern of homeowners coming to stay only in the short season from April to June naturally results in great neglect of the gardens during the rest of the year. So it is quite amazing that such ancient roses should have survived.

WHAT ARE THE GREAT ROSES WHICH HAVE STOOD TEST OF TIME?

I have made a personal selection of 16, with emphasis being on roses which do well throughout India.

1. Rose Edward (Edouard)

Originating according to unverified tradition in the Isle of Bourbon in the Indian Ocean, this rose, with its very vigorous growth, blue green foliage and rose-pink semi-double flowers, blessed with the most exhilarating of rose perfumes is to be found growing throughout the many different climates of our vast country. It is quite remarkable that the same rose should be grown on a field scale for use in garlands in the tropical belts of the River Cauvery in South India, and still relish the quite different climate of the Himalayan foothills – some of the most beautiful plants of this variety could be seen in Srinagar, the ancient capital of Tehri Garhwal State, now partially submerged by the Tehri Dam. Rose Edward is by no means disease free. It does get mildew in drier weather, but soon recovers to grow as strongly as before. Because the entire plant is aromatic, insects, particularly the sucking types like scale or mites have a fascination for the plants. But this is a minor problem easily solved. We should plant this variety in our gardens for its tremendous vigour and incredible fragrance. It can also be used as a rose stock especially on alkaline soils. There is a non flowering form of Rose Edward which is often used for this purpose.

2. Souvenir de la Malmaison

Like Edward, this is also technically a Bourbon rose. Named ostensibly in remembrance of the famous rose garden of Malmaison (near Paris) created by the Empress Josephine, there are nowadays discordant notes and this romantic theory does not find favour.

At its best this variety forms a beautiful rounded bush bearing hundreds of pale-pink rosette flowers with a very distinct fragrance, called Lavanir in some areas. One of the highlights of a visit to a rose fancier near Anand in Gujarat during the Baroda Rose Convention {1992} was the sight of a bush of this variety fully 8 feet tall and wide,

completely covered with bloom. But unlike Edward, this can easily be grown in pots. Mind you, it hates wet weather. It is grown for garlands in place with a dry climate, like Gujarat. Does well in the Deccan Plateau, and even in the totally different climate of Calcutta nice plants could be seen in the gardens of the Agri Horticultural Society.

3. Gruss an Teplitz

We progress now from the typical Bourbon to a variety with a more complex parentage, but technically still a Bourbon. This rose bears lovely red double flowers with darker shadings and is very fragrant – not the damask fragrance of some red roses, but more distinctly fruity. The plants grow vigorously with strong straight basal shoots, being constantly produced. Widely adapted to Indian climates. I still remember a hedge which I grew in the unkind climate of Madras city. Superb specimens could be seen in the totally different climate of Rishikesh on the way to the origin of the Ganga. Grown on a field scale in the desert climate of Pushkar, near Ajmer, the flowers are plucked, sun-dried on terraces and sent to Mecca. The air in the entire area is permeated with its lush fragrance. A very healthy rose, easily grown, which deserves a place in every garden.

4. Paul Neyron

Rose researchers say that rose breeding progressed from the Bourbons to the next stage represented by the Hybrid Perpetuals of which this variety is a very typical example. Paul Neyron bears enormous fully double flowers on long stiff stems. Even the foliage is extraordinarily large. Treated generously, do not spare the cowdung manure, it will reward you with a profusion of giant fragrant blooms. Not for the faint-hearted, but for those who love large flowered roses. Very healthy and easy to grow. I still recall a beautifully proportioned plant, grown in a pot, by my friend the late Brig. J. P. Anthony, in Hyderabad. Good specimens can be seen throughout India even in a hill station climate like Kodaikanal. At one time a very popular rose – so popular that the characteristic shade of reddish-pink was called “Neyron Pink”.

For those who prefer the redder shades, there are 2 more – George Dickson and Hugh Dickson. Lovely specimens of these could be seen in Hyderabad in the old days.

5. Frau Karl Druschki

Another Hybrid Perpetual, but with flowers of purest white and exquisite Hybrid Tea form. Many still believe, and I am one of them, that this rose, when well grown is to this day – one of the most beautiful of white roses. It forms a very large bush – it can be grown as a semi-climber and a modicum of attention will reward you with a profusion of perfect blooms. A very popular rose in Kodaikanal though it does pretty well in North India as also in Hyderabad. But be prepared to give it room and be ready to combat mildew.

6. Madame Falcot

From the Hybrid Perpetuals we progress to the Tea roses which together with the earlier class are the progenitors of the modern garden rose – the Hybrid Tea Mme. Falcot with its lovely pale apricot buds and apricot yellow blooms with quilled petals is the epitome of the elegance of the Tea roses. This rose which grows so well in the Deccan plateau – at one time every old Bangalore bungalow had a plant – has also the most distinctive yellow green foliage. Equally adapted to being grown in the ground or in pots, Madame Falcot is the rose for those who like subtle shades of colour. Very healthy and hardy in spite of its

delicate appearance,

I can not resist the temptation of mentioning some more of the Tea roses which are equally easy to grow. Devonienses, with creamy white camellia like flowers, Mrs B.R. Cant in 2 shades of pink (at one time one of the Bangalore staples for the cut flower market) and the so called copper rose. Safrano, with apricot flowers borne on distinctive plum coloured stems. The latter was a favourite of the British in Ootacamund and Kodaikanal, and it grows well enough in my garden at Hosur near Bangalore.

7. Lady Hillingdon

By the standards of Madame Falcot, which is more than 150 years old, this, which is virtually the last of the Tea, is comparatively modern, having been introduced only in 1910. It is a variety to cherish, bearing buds of incredible elegance in yet unsurpassed shades of apricot yellow opening to semi-double blooms blessed with the typical "Tea" fragrance. A rose of rare beauty which should be grown much more widely. It is very hardy, amenable to both ground and pot culture, and there is a very nice climbing form, which had reached about 10 feet in my Hosui garden.

8. Rêve d'Or

From the Tea roses we now come to Noisettes derived from inter-crosses of the Teas with the more robust *R. multiflora* and its hybrids

Rêve d'Or is one of the most satisfactory of climbing roses. A well-grown plant will reward you with innumerable straw yellow to apricot blooms several times in a year. My attention was drawn to the virtues of this plant when I took a few bud-eyes from a very ancient plant clearly in its last days, from one of Kodaikanal's older houses. Budded on fresh stock, the performance of this rose is a revelation. Very easily grown and we have the bonus of attractive reddish young foliage. One of the most popular of climbing roses in the warmer climates of the world, this is a must for your garden.

9. Maréchal Niel

The ultimate Noisette climber, it is perhaps too well known to require description. But I can not resist pointing out that the globular clear yellow flowers borne in such incredible profusion make this easily the best climber for the plains. Still quite clear in my mind's eye is the breath-taking spectacle presented by this plant growing on a rustic arbour adjoining the thatched house of one of the great rose growers of Hyderabad, Mushti Laxminarayana, a freedom fighter who believed in simple living. Equally alluring is the sight of this variety growing in my courtyard in Kodaikanal, revelling in the warmth. It grows well in Pune too. I remember an entire wall covered by it in the house of Dr M. N. Hardikar, a well known rosarian and breeder.

10. Reine Marie Henriette panachée or Madame Driout

This again is a Noisette derivative, raised from one of the most famous of Noisettes - Gloire de Dijon, second only to Maréchal Niel. This climbing rose is also easily grown with the most eye catching flowers of pink with darker pink and red stripes. It is indeed surprising that such a spectacular rose should be neglected. By all means try it. As India's pioneering hybridizer B. S. Bhattacharji said there is no other climbing rose with such distinctive striped flowers which grows easily in the plains of India.

11. Prosperity

Coming to what are called Hybrid Musks, we have, in Prosperity, one of the most easily grown of all roses. If you grow this semi-climbing shrub you will be rewarded several times in the year with enormous clusters of pearly white flowers. Extraordinarily adaptable, it grows very well even in Madras and the more tropical Thiruvanaathapuram, as well as in better rose growing climes like Hyderabad or Delhi. It is so vigorous and healthy that it has been used as a stock. Dr. Pal raised a seedling from this, Delhi White Pearl, with similar though slightly more restrained growth, and flowers of a purer white.

12. Chatillon Rose

From the giants of the rose world we come to the dwarfs with Chatillon Rose which is what we call a Polyantha.

But this one is dwarf only in comparison. The plant can grow to 4 feet when looked after with care. It is altogether a very hardy rose. Planted as a hedge in the same Hyderabad garden of Mushti Lakshminarayana, the profusion of single bright pink flowers looked like a pink sunset. It was one of the favourites of J. P. Agarwal, the great rose-grower of Lucknow, it is well adapted to landscaping, though I am sure we could raise very attractive specimens in pots.

13. Cécile Brunner

This is again a Polyantha, but very different as it has considerable "Tea" blood. As distinct from the wild rose splendour of Chatillon, this bears the most exquisitely shaped buds of palest pink. No wonder it is called 'Sweetheart Rose' in the West. For all the delicacy of its appearance, this variety, which forms a medium sized bush is extremely well adapted to the various Indian climates. It performs brilliantly even in Madras, but is at its best in the moderate climate of the Deccan Plateau. Those who live in the more favourable rose growing regions should also try the very similar Perle d'Or derived from Madame Falcot, which also has perfectly formed buds but is apricot pink.

14. Archduke Charles

To complete our list of the shorter roses, we have Archduke Charles, technically a China rose. It shows that typical feature of the Chinas – of the flower darkening, not fading with age. One of the most easily grown of roses, it bears a profusion of pale pink flowers which age to almost red. Beautiful specimens can be found in the most unlikely places. I recall a wonderful plant growing in the garden of a plantation watchman, located at the edge of a rock face.

15. La France

This is often called the first of the modern Hybrid Tea roses which are so popular today. Though a very old variety it is easily grown in India with nicely formed fragrant flowers of a clear rose pink - 'La France Pink'. Even in Madras lovely specimens were grown in pots. Pre-eminently a rose for pot culture.

16. Crimson Glory

It is difficult to resist superlatives when writing on Crimson Glory. The greatest

achievement of one of the greatest of all rose breeders, Wilhelm Kordes of Germany, this rose, introduced in 1935 set a new standard. Such a colour – a deep velvety crimson, and such fragrance, are yet to be surpassed. It is again well adapted to pot culture.

It is easy to see that these traditional varieties have such robust qualities and are so easy to grow that we should devote more space in our gardens to them. But robust or not any rose requires a minimum amount of care – at least on a par with other plants you value. If this modest requirement is met we get quite extraordinary results for the modicum of time and effort involved. All can survive without constant spraying of pesticides which is rightly looked down upon in an eco-conscious world. It would be a great shame if these roses, well tested and true, are allowed to disappear from our gardens, merely because they are “old”.