

The scent of a rose



They are known as the 'rose warriors' of India, a title that may seem to be an oxymoron given the gentility of the flower. However, it is an adulatory coronation to a couple who are devoted rose breeders, engaged for over two decades in discovering new varieties of this world's most popular bloom. Living in the quiet hills of Kodaikanal in Tamil Nadu, 77 year-old M S Viraraghavan, better known as Viru, and his wife Girija, 75, have zealously spent almost four decades nurturing roses in their exquisite garden. Together, they have explored the remotest parts of India for indigenous rose varieties, developed countless rose seedlings, and registered close to a hundred new rose varieties with the International Rose Registry in the US.

botany

Though India is a tropical country, the average Indian rose grower has been forced to grow varieties that are best suited for milder climates in regions such as Europe and the US. "There is an urgent need to remedy this situation by creating a new race of warm-climate roses by introducing new genetic material into the modern rose. Our aim is to create varieties better suited to India's warm climate and *terra firma*," says Viru, who has been working with two Indian rose species, *Rosa gigantea* and *Rosa clinophylla*.

While Viru works out the mechanics of hybridisation (collecting seeds, germinating and growing the seedlings and cross breeding), Girija—granddaughter of former Indian President Dr Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan—is responsible for

the meticulous documentation of the process (recording the crosses and labelling the seedlings). Together, they oversee and evaluate their work with an individual point of view.

Viru's romance with the rose started in his teens. "It was in Sims Park, Coonoor, in the Nilgiri Mountains, that I fell in love with roses," he recalls. "My father was the director of agriculture in Madras State, so we spent a few days every summer in the guest house in the middle of this park. One morning, I happened to look out at the enclosed rose garden and was mesmerised at the sight of the golden Julien Potin rose glowing in the sunlight."

In 1959, Viru joined the IAS and went on to become the director and secretary of the agriculture and

horticulture departments in Andhra Pradesh. "Every Sunday would be spent in the beautiful rose garden of my friend Mushti Lakshminarayana, a veteran freedom fighter. One day he asked me a life-altering question: 'Viraraghavan, are you not wasting your time in the IAS?'" Soon, Viru quit the service and gladly opted for full-time devotion to breeding roses with unwavering support from his wife. "The main objective is to create better roses for India—roses that can be grown with normal care."

For her part, Girija finds the rose "intriguing, because of its combination of beauty, mystique, many legends and myths and the history of its evolution". As a student of history, she was fascinated to delve into the history of the rose in India from ancient times. "There's nothing in the history books about the rose in India, and yet the rose has been an integral part of our society, culture and civilisation from earliest times," she says.

In 1980, they moved from Hyderabad to Kodaikanal and created their much-acclaimed rose garden. The aim: to duplicate the beautiful land with evergreen forests with flowering plants. This rocky garden-cum-research station not just houses a large variety of roses but grows an extraordinary collection of perennial shrubs and climbers, beautiful *Magnolia campbellii* from Eastern Himalaya, known as the most beauti-

From the Viraraghavans' garden



Ahimsa



Naga Belle



Rosa gigantea



Golden Threshold



Incense Indigo



Priyatama

ful tree in the world, and a variety of rhododendrons including the Vireyas from Papua New Guinea with startling shades of yellow and orange and a compelling clove scent.

As tales of their rosy endeavours travelled far and wide, they have received due recognition for their pioneering achievements. The Viraraghavans are recipients of 'The World Rose Award' by the World Federation of Rose Societies and 'The Great Rosarian of The World Award' by the Huntington Library and Garden, USA, to name a few. They are the founder members of the Indian Rose Federation and have been editors of the *Indian Rose Annual*, brought out by the federation, for the past 35 years where they highlight developments in the rose

world apart from sharing historical anecdotes of the bloom. The duo are also active conservationists and environmentalists. Both are founder members of The Palni Hills Conservation Society in Kodaikanal that is striving towards preserving the green cover. In fact, the book *Kodaikanal: Vanishing Heritage of an Island in the Sky* (Niyogi) released recently was edited by Girija.

Don't the blooms and blossoms miss the Viraraghavans when they are away on expeditions around the world? "Some amount of damage occurs," admits Viru. Though they have a caretaker family living on the premises, "the plants miss us and it always shows when we return." Call them gentle reminders!