

Roses in India

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The reprinted article from the *Indian Rose Annual XV 1999* by M. S. (Viru) Viraraghavan in the spring 2018 issue of *the HRIA Journal* has prompted me to write. I have been to India twice, the first time as a mature age student when over fifty years ago I travelled about incredibly cheaply for six weeks, and then again last year for just a fortnight, when I went to the hill stations in Tamil Nadu (South India). India is certainly not a place normally associated with roses, as they only flourish in a limited number of areas. Nevertheless, there is the Rose Society of India, which holds a rose show each year in December. For all the area on the plains, the cooler months (and therefore suitable for roses) are from November to early March. And as holds true for most other rose-growing areas, modern roses are almost the only ones that are grown.

Viru and his wife Girija are among the few who appreciate and grow old roses, as well as breeding new roses suitable for the Indian climate. On the whole, the roses that cope with the heat are the ones we cherish: Chinas, Teas and Noisettes. Together we are seeking 'heat-hardy' roses, rather than 'cold-hardy' ones: roses that are more likely than not to be virtually evergreen too.

Although the rose is not a common plant in India, it has a long history on the sub-continent. The Viraraghavans have included information about this in talks and articles from time to time. Most recently, they have begun an account on the helpmefind.com/rose website entitled *The Rose in India, Past, Present and Future* (search under author: Viraraghavan). Part 1 has already been posted.

Roses other than the indigenous species first came to India via the Silk Road route, from China to the east, and from the Middle East, including Persia to the west. They were grown by the rajahs (local rulers) and merchants who could afford to have gardens surround their palaces and homes. As written historical records are scant in India, the writings of visitors are the chief source of information. Repeat-flowering roses from China came to India before AD 1200, and later the Moghul emperors (AD1500 to late 1700s) brought roses with them. At some time, *R. damascena* was introduced for the production of rose oil. Queen Victoria is said to have preferred Indian rose oil. The British also brought roses, with the East India Company bringing them from their trading ports in China to be refreshed on the journey west, particularly at Calcutta.

In 2016, when the Viraraghavans addressed the 14th International Heritage Rose Conference at the WFRS Regional Convention in Beijing, they were able to list a surprising 32 different old roses that had been re-discovered from Japan and China to Myanmar. They included a few Bourbons, Damasks and one Hybrid Perpetual and one Miniature. Eight were from India - mostly Chinas and Teas. In China, Wang Guoliang has led efforts to find old roses, and establish collections of them. In the rest of the Asian region such efforts are lacking, though Viru



▲ Golden Threshold

▼ Faith Whittlesey



R. laevigata rosea ►



▲ Girija and Viru



◀ Veranda with pots

and Girija have become aware of a university in Van, eastern Turkey, that is establishing a collection of old garden roses.

Last year, having flown to Chennai (formerly Madras), I took a domestic flight and then a taxi ride (remarkably cheap for about 40km) to Mettupalayam. Right next door to the hotel there was a plant nursery, so of course I poked around, and found a batch of cutting-grown roses, which from the only half decent bloom seemed to be a Tea rose of some sort. Very early next morning, I caught the narrow gauge Nilgiri Mountain Railway to the former colonial hill station of Ootacamund. This now has the rather incredible name of Uhagamandalam, but is still called Ooty for short. In colonial India, it was often called Snooty Ooty! The highest point nearby rises to just over 2,600m. The climate, owing to Ooty's latitude, is best described as sub-tropical, with introduced plants like palms, brugmansia (angel's trumpet) and bougainvillea all doing well; lantana has gone wild. Three different species of eucalypt have made themselves at home, and can grow to a great height.

Ooty has a well maintained botanical garden and a large municipal rose garden, both on sloping sites. The climate would probably allow suitable repeat flowering roses, such as Teas, to flower year round. But in the rose garden pruning takes place fairly early in the year, for peak flowering in April and May, which is when people who can afford it come to the hills to escape increasing heat on the plains. The monsoon hits in the middle of the year, though owing to their elevation, the hill stations can get some rain at other times of the year too. When I visited the rose garden just a few beds had been left unpruned, with plenty of flowers for visitors to see. There were few old roses; a bed of *R. roxburghii* in flower, a *R. gigantea* on a tripod with a few flowers, and some Noisettes too. These were growing on a slope, draped over a substantial metal support about a metre above the ground.

From Ooty, I made my way to Kodaikanal, where the Viraraghavans live. There was no direct route, so I had to take several buses, stay overnight in the busy city of Coimbatore, and at the end get a taxi up into the hills to Kodaikanal. It was not a relaxing ride, as the driver scarcely slowed down for the many sharp bends on the way. Kodaikanal is much smaller than Ooty, so I was able to get to most places of interest on foot. I saw my first old rose in a park, with **Souvenir de Mme Léonie Viennot**, Dijon Tea 1898, on an arch sporting a few blooms. The next day I engaged a guide, who first took me to a plant conservation nursery where the manager had the double yellow *Banksia* rose over his front porch. The latter part of the walk was down into a valley into the native, evergreen forest (shola).

I had arranged to spend the last three days with the Viraraghavans, who proved to be the most welcoming, relaxed and hospitable hosts imaginable. One day we went to the Kodai Club (formerly the English Club) for lunch, and another day they took me to a site being prepared for a new rose garden. All the roses were to be planted before the monsoon season, just a few months off, but I



▲ *Banksia rose*

▼ Garden with pots



haven't heard whether this in fact happened. Viru was hoping to have a few of his roses included in the planting.

After occupying senior civil service positions related to agriculture and horticulture, Viru retired early to concentrate on his rose breeding, ably assisted by Girija. Although thousands of seedlings have been raised over time, the operation has no commercial aspects to it. Viru's efforts have involved using the vigour and heat resistance of the climbers *R. gigantea* and *R. clinophylla*, both of which, after much travel and effort, he sourced within India itself, although they are found in neighbouring countries too. Much like our own Alister Clark, he has sought to breed good garden roses. He values single, semi-double and informal blooms as much as any seedling with Hybrid Tea-style blooms, though good colour and repeat bloom are desirable.

R. gigantea is a good seed setter, so Viru uses a large variety of other roses as pollen parents: Chinas, Teas, Hybrid Teas and various kinds of found rose. Unlike commercial breeders, he is unable to trial his roses in field beds, so raises his seedlings in wooden trays, to be then pricked out into small black plastic bag pots. The wooden trays are kept in a large courtyard, and have wire coverings placed over them every evening to keep rats out. The seedlings in small black plastic bag pots line the veranda rails. Seedlings that show promise are then potted up into larger containers, both black plastic and ceramic, and these virtually fill the back-garden area.

When I was there, quite a number of roses were in bloom, including a massive *R. gigantea*, which partly covers the roof of the house. This would give some home owners apoplexy, but not Viru and Girija. The garden contains a number of arches for climbing roses, including a *R. gigantea* x *clinophylla* cross and a bright yellow single climber, **Golden Threshold**, a *R. gigantea* x **Golden Showers** cross. Also in flower was a rose found in Japan, *R. laevigata rosea*. The Tea rose **Aussie Sixer** has been named for the six WA women who produced *Tea Roses: Old Roses for Warm Gardens*. Another attractive Tea has been named for a former USA diplomat, **Faith Whittlesey**.

Viru and Girija's plant interests extend well beyond roses. Their rambling and somewhat wild garden includes a wide range of trees, shrubs and smaller plants. In flower, I noticed rhododendron (some bred by Viru), abutilon, clematis, iris, several species of orchid, and pots of the now old-fashioned schizanthus (poor man's orchid) near the front door. Gardening has not been easy on the sloping site, as rock is near the surface, and some slabs can still be seen, hence the need to grow so many roses in pots. But it is a shady garden, with winding paths and some steps, therefore interesting to explore. It is a lot to look after, even though there is help with maintenance, so the Viraraghavans are planning to retire (again!) to Pondicherry where they have another property. It is on the coast south of Chennai, and therefore nearer to their daughter who lives in that city. One can only wish them well, and that they get the recognition their rose-breeding efforts deserve.

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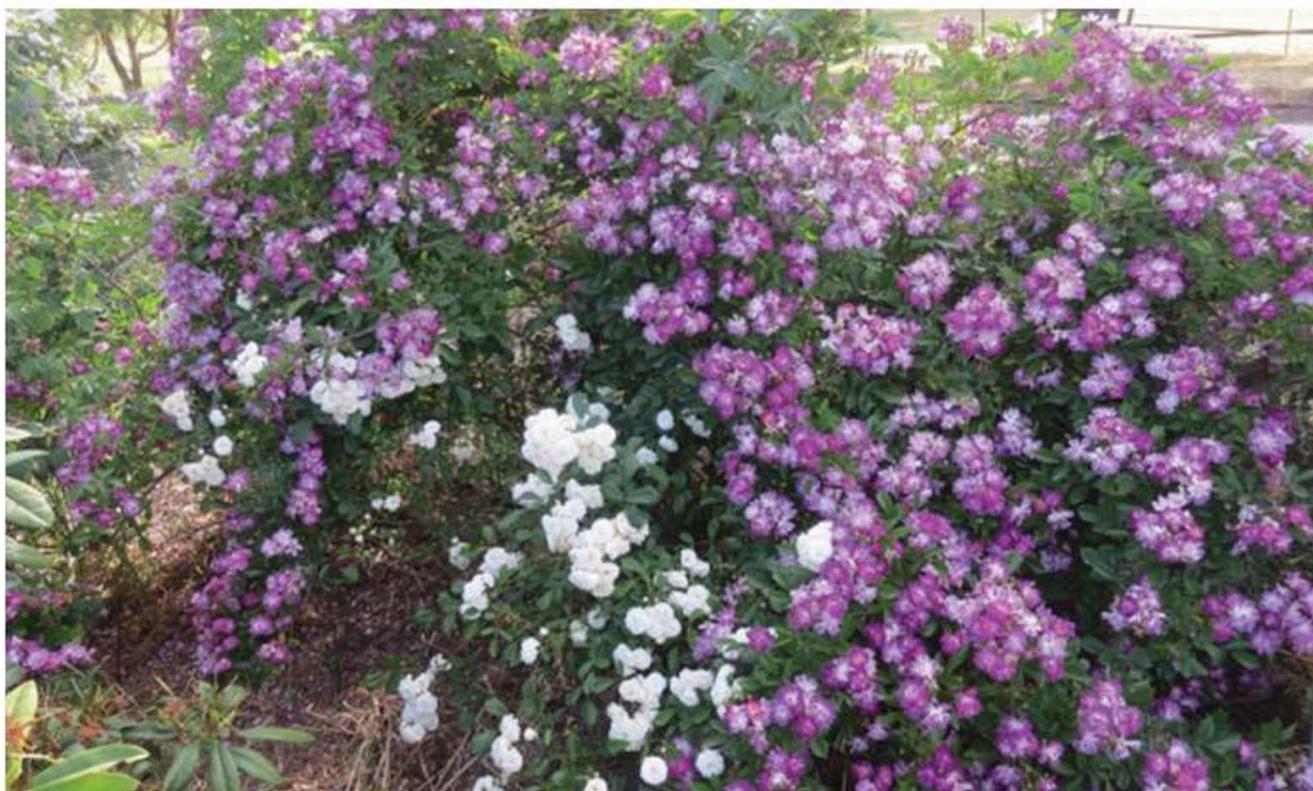
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Ed: we are indebted to the *Indian Rose Annual* for the memorable line, "Roses in public gardens should be labelled, because the public like to know what they're stealing."



Marie-Jeanne, white Polyantha 1913 (p. 48) was collected from Melbourne General Cemetery as "Duncan's Pompom". With Veilchenblau, Rambler 1909. Photo: Ed.

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