

A rose by any other name

M.S. Viraraghavan, the country's best-known rose breeder, in conversation with Hema Vijay on growing roses in Chennai and more...

THE HINDU, March 8, 2014, Hema Vijay



'Ahimsa'



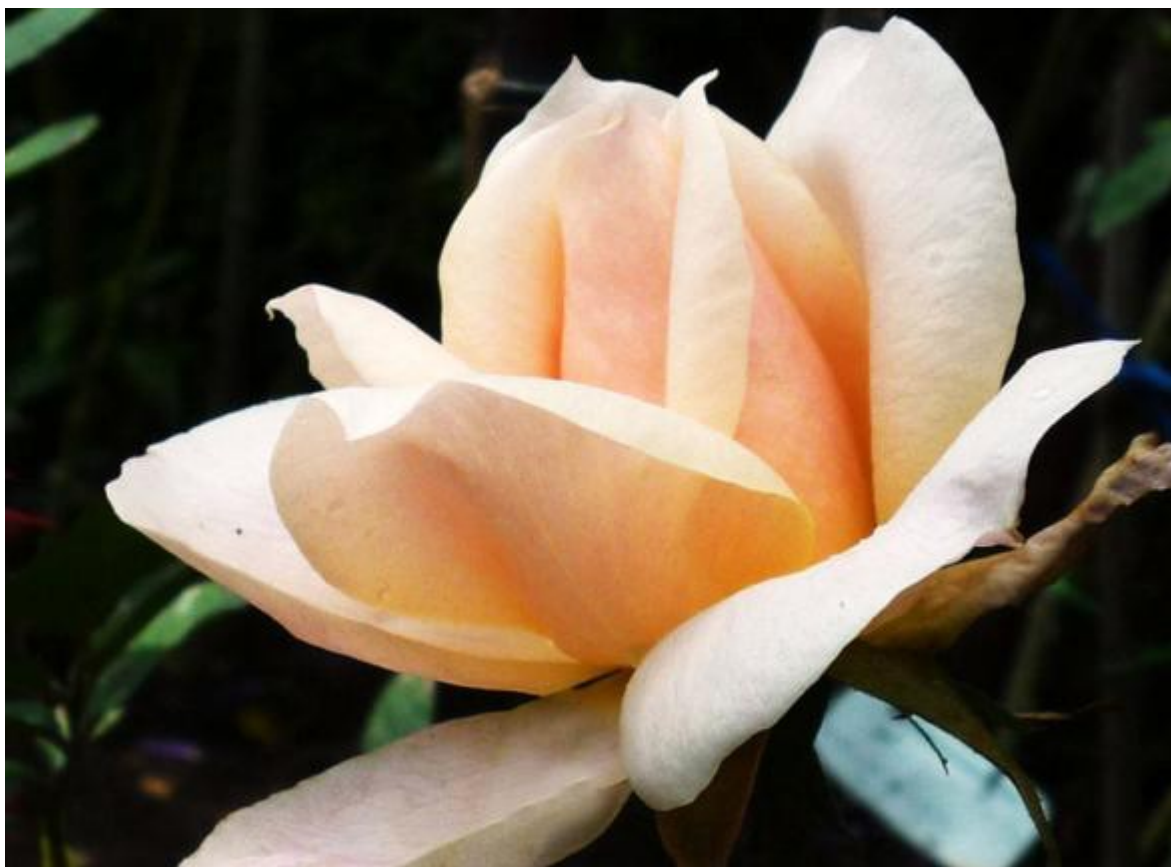
Fragrant friends - M.S.Viraraghavan with his roses



'Faith Whittlesey'



'Ganges Mist'



'Narender'



'Incense Indigo'



'Naga Belle'

M.S. Viraraghavan has developed thousands of rose seedlings and registered over 90 new rose varieties with the International Rose Registry in the U.S. He is also the founder president of the Palani Hills Conservation Council and is presently its President Emeritus. He and his wife, Girija Viraraghavan settled down in Kodaikanal to devote their attention to rose gardening and nature conservation. At the behest of INTACH, he was in the city recently to give a talk on the natural and cultural heritage of the rose in India.

Is it possible to grow luxuriant roses in Chennai?

It is quite possible. We should concentrate on heritage roses as the backbone of the rose garden. Be very careful about selecting modern roses, especially those that would have been grafted on multiflora rose stocks are not suited for saline conditions. It is better to source rose plants from north India which would have been grafted on the Indica odorata stock. Roses like sunlight. They need 5 to 6 hours of good sunlight. You have to think of vigorous and hardy roses which can stand up to the brackish kind of water we get here from bore wells.

What kind of roses come up well in Chennai's conditions?

Heritage roses survive better as they are raised from cuttings. The Edward rose or the paneer rose and the Kakinada Red roses can be good choices, which are two very nice, fragrant plants and quite easy to raise. I might also mention rose varieties I developed from wild rose species, like Faith Whittlessy and Narender. These varieties will come up well in Chennai. Varieties like Europeana, Montezuma, and Tea roses like B.R.Cant which sport the fragrance of tea, old varieties like Lamarque and Marechal Niel are good choices too. Some of the polyantha roses for e.g. Summer Snow and Ahalya will perform well. These are dwarf and will flower profusely. The shrub rose Carefree Beauty is another good choice for the Chennai climate. My rose Ahimsa is a hybrid tea rose and is completely thornless and may do well in Chennai. A few of my other roses, Incense Indigo, Twilight Tryst, Naga Belle and Ganges Mist could also be tried.

What soil mix and pesticides do you recommend?

It helps to raise the rose in the right soil mix - half portion of red soil, and a quarter portion each of river sand and manure, in a pot. You don't have to use synthetic insecticides and pesticides. Neem-based pesticides are effective in countering insect infestation. For countering fungal attacks, make a solution of one teaspoon of baking soda dissolved in a litre of water, and spray this on the plants. You could do this as a precautionary measure too. This treatment will handle both the common possible fungal problems - mildew disease, which throws up a coating on leaves during periods when the night and day temperature varies sharply and the weather is dry; and the black spot fungal disease that comes in wet weather, with small black spots appearing on the leaves.

How can one develop a new variety of the rose?

You can get new varieties of rose plants by raising it from its seeds, which often turn out different from its parent plant. The rose plant produces a small fruit with miniature seeds. The rose fruit takes four or five months to mature when it will turn orange in color. Take the seeds out then and sow it in sandy soil in a pot. Keep it on a veranda where it can get morning sunlight, but will also be protected from rain.

Why does rose have such a great appeal?

There is an anecdote that Nehru wore the rose in his button hole because the rose is a

symbol of grace that is quite often lacking in India. There is something magical about the rose – its association, fragrance, romance, etc. These are not ideas to be dismissed lightly. We require such things in our life.

Why do you advocate 'gracious' or 'slow' gardening?

Instant gardening, wherein you get colourful plants in your garden overnight, misses the very point of gardening. Gardening nurtures the soul. It has to be done slowly and with interest. Ultimately, you have to give it your personal attention, getting your hands and legs muddy. The rewards of slow gardening are great. It includes peace of mind which is normally achieved by deep meditation. Gardening is also a very good exercise.