ROSE

Rosa sp.

"There is a flowre whereso he be, and shall not yet be named for me, Primeros, Violet or fresh Daisy? He pass them all in his degree, That best liketh me. One that I love most enterly, Gelofyr gentil, or Rosemary? Camamil, Borage or Savery? Nay, certenly, here is not he that pleaseth me! I chese a floure freshest of face, What is his name that thou chosen has? The Rose I suppose! " Thomas Philipps 16th century

Known to many as the queen of flowers, beloved of Shakespeare, and frequently considered to be the world's most popular bloom, there are few who would not recognise this iconic flower. But the roses so often supplied by florists, or which crowd garden centres bare rooted in the winter time, barely resemble the plant in it's ancient form. The spindly and shapeless bushes and large, gaudy, scentless and soulless flowers of modern roses have in their ancestry a flower filled with the true essence of romance - a delicate beauty and heady fragrance far lovelier and more desirable than any of the modern pretenders.

Most modern roses cultivated today are Hybrid Teas, largely an aberration of the 20th century. While a few Hybrid Teas retain the delicious scent of their forbears, most of the qualities which make old roses so very desirable have been bred out of modern varieties, as breeders strive for the "perfect" cut flower, rather than overall performance of the garden plant. Old roses offer so much more.

The history of the rose is a long one. Wild roses have thrived since pre-historic times, and fossil evidence indicates they abounded well before Homo sapiens. Around 150 rose species grew wild throughout Europe, America, Asia and the Middle East, with evidence of roses being cultivated and bred by human societies as early as 5000 years ago. Greek and Roman cultures revered the rose, which appeared frequently in their mythology and literature, often as a symbol of love and beauty. Roses were used in perfumes, pot pourri and herbal medicine by early cultures. However, it was in the 15th and 16th centuries that the hybridising of the rose began to have a real impact on the form of the bloom.

Due to many associations with pagan symbolism and the rose's exquisite sensuality, the medieval Christian Church was first at pains to distance itself from such a voluptuous flower, but this bizarre concept was finally overcome when the church eventually dedicated the perfect blooms to their goddess Mary, and the earliest rosary beads were confected from the petals of the rose.

There are a number of methods recommended for the production of rosary beads, and I include but one here.

Pick fresh petals in the morning, and chop finely. Cover with water, and simmer

gently for several hours until the petals and water form a pulp (it may be necessary to add more water if the mix dries out). Test the pulp occassionally, and when it adheres together when pressed between the fingers, remove from heat, and roll into balls. Pierce beads with a fine nail and string onto a sturdy thread - originally this thread was of silk - and dry gently out of direct sunlight, turning occassionally. As a pleasing alternative, one might wish to roll the beads in spices prior to drying.

In the middle ages, Gallica, Alba and Damask roses were popluar throughout Europe, finding their way into the gardens of monastaries, noblemen and rich merchants. The latter saw the commercial opportunities of the flower, which they were quick to exploit for profit in the production of perfume and medicines. Roses were also very popular as a flavouring agent in sweets, and remain so today. The more expensive Turkish Delight is a rose-flavoured confection. Delicious! Damask roses were brought to Europe by the returning Crusaders, and it was from Damask blooms that Attar of Roses was first produced. Many medicines were derived from rose, including Syrup of Rose, red roses boiled in sugar and water, which "*may be given competently to feble, sick, melancoly and colorike people*" *Culpeper*. Aromatherapy was also practised, with the following popular recipe...*"Drye roses put to ye nose to smell do comforte the brain and the harte, and quenchethe sprite". Culpeper*

A worthy Damask, and one of my personal favourites is "Leda" , also known as "Painted Damask", a large and prickly plant, forming a dense and rounded shrub well furnished with blue grey leaves. Although Leda was bred in 1827, which makes it a little out of period for the medieval gardener, it is worth mentioning here for it's extraordinary beauty, and for being a damask, a variety generally popular in medieval times. Leda, like many old varieties, flowers only once each year, at Beltane, but typically for an old rose, the quantity and quality of that one flush is a glory. The blooms are smallish, around 5 cm across, the deep, brick red rounded buds opening to a snow white flower edged with blood red at the very tips of the petals. The plant covers in dozens of blooms, which in various stages of opening gives a delightful red and white effect, and the fragrance is intense, fruity and delicious.

Likely to be the original Gallica, and certainly the most ancient on record, is R. Gallica officinalis, the "Apothacaries rose". An ancient variety spread through Europe and Britain by the Romans, it is described by many writers as red, although to my mind it is more of a deep hot pink. A smaller shrub, in no way resembling the gaunt upright growth of the modern Hybrid Tea, this full, voluptuous and arching beauty has many merits. During early summer, the plant literally covers in bloom, almost obscuring the leaves with a profusion of rich pink, fat, double blooms, the scent of which is close to overpowering. The petals retain their intense fragrance when dried, making a valuable edition to pot pourri, and the perfect bloom for rosary beads. The canes arch to the ground under the weight of their glowing burden in a most charming manner. Individual blooms are

only around 7 cm across, but are borne enmasse, giving a breathtaking display of colour, form, and fragrance. Culpeper advises that this rose had a multitude of medicinal uses, and takes many pages in his herbal to describe the various ailments which can be cured thereby. In brief, he states that the Red Rose *"is very good for headache...pains in the eyes, ears, throat and gums, and also for the fundament*". Something to bear in mind! The Apothacaries rose was later taken as the emblem of the Lancastrians, the Red Rose of Lancaster. It flowers just once a year, at Beltane, but is worth the wait, and holds a proud place at the centre of my physic garden at Wildwood.

Another very ancient variety is the Alba family of roses, known widely in early medieval Europe. I have but one Alba growing at Wildwood, "Alba Maxima", also known as "Bonnie Prince Charlie's Rose", "The Jacobites Rose", "Cheshire Rose" and most famously "the White Rose of York". This historically significant rose is my pride and joy, a glorious, generous and headily perfumed creature unsurpassed. Desperate to acquire this rose over 25 years ago, I purchased it mail order from a mainland supplier, and have never seen it anywhere in Tasmania other than here at Wildwood. Now at a quarter of a century in age, this huge shrub is around 3 metres tall and around 3 metres wide. The leaves are a rich blue grey colour, and at Beltane the entire plant smothers in tiny, creamy white double blooms with a fragrance which must be experienced to be believed. On a warm, still day, the fortunate gardener walking past the shrub almost lifts off the ground due to the intensity of the perfume. In cooler weather, the snowy blooms take on a delicate blush of the palest creamy pink. Truely fabulous, and hardly a wonder that this most wonderful of roses should have remained so famous and so loved over the centuries.

"Subsequently, after the bitter years of war, The Houses of York and Lancaster fused their emblems, R. alba, and R. gallica officinalis...and so emerged the Tudor Rose, emblem of England to this day". Peter Beales 1986.

Roses require rich, well mulched soil, a regular deep watering and full sun to thrive, although the albas are rather unique in that they will tolerate shade far better than any of their cousins. Old roses are far hardier and more disease resistant than modern Hybrid Teas, and as Wildwood is an organic garden I use no toxic sprays or pesticides, and find that healthy soil and healthy biota makes for healthy and disease resistant roses. I use whatever animal manures I can acquire, together with a thick layer of old newspapers and straw, forming a "sandwich" of mulch around 20 cm thick, which lasts all year, and is renewed again each spring. Pruning old roses is a simple affair. At the winter solstice, and with clean, sharp secateurs, remove around one third of the old canes, cutting off right to the base of the plant. With this method, your rose will be completely renewed every three years.

A very popluar method of growing roses in previous centuries was "pegging

down". After pruning is complete, you will have around one third of the mature canes remaining. Take each of these, and incline them towards the ground, forming an arch. A small peg or sturdy wire can then be hammered into the soil, and the rose cane fastened with garden twine, so that it is secured in an arching form. In spring, when the buds shoot, they will seek the sun, thereby sending up dozens of lateral shoots along the full length of the arched cane. Rather than accepting that the cane will produce flowers only at it's tip, the skilled gardener thus coaxes blooms from the end of the many newly formed lateral shoots, increasing the flush 100-fold, and sculpting a beautifully arched, fountain shaped shrub in the process.

Roses continue to form the base of many modern cosmetics and perfumes, and simple creams and washes are easily produced by steeping heavily scented petals in boiled water before adding to creams or oils. Cooking with rosewater is a delightful experience, and adds a flavour which to my mind is very pleasing. Many years ago, I produced a batch of Rose Petal Jam at Wildwood, and recall vividly the huge mass of frangrant petals required to produce one kilogram of weight. The jam was delicious, but it cost me almost every bloom I had available!

Roses are easliy propagated from cuttings taken during winter pruning, and readers may wish to contact me to discuss the availability of cuttings at Wildwood. All parts of the rose are edible, and will be of great interest to possums and other nibblers. Country gardeners will need to be on red alert. A very few old varieties are available at better Tasmanian garden centres, but a far more extensive range can be obtained by mail order from mainland old rose specialists, such as Honeysuckle Cottage in the Blue Mountains. Island Herbs propagates some delightful old roses, including that classic medieval beauty, the Apothocaries rose. Heritage Roses Australia Inc are another useful resource.

Modern roses have earned themselves a reputation as fussy, demanding and difficult, the shrubs themselves gaunt and miserable, the flowers over-sized, over bright, stiff and soulless. But for the medieval gardener, a romantic old rose is a generous, beautiful, hardy and worthwhile plant. No medieval garden is complete without one.

Refs. *Classic Roses* , Peter Beales 1985, Culpeper's Herbal, *Medieval Flowers*, Miranda Innes & Clay Perry
And with special thanks to Jackie Leitch for her Rosary bead Recipe.

YIS
Lady Madryn of Wildwood