

# ROSE GARDENING REFLECTIONS

By Joe Foraker

Rose enthusiasts who have been around for a half dozen (or more) decades can probably remember when the scent of nearly all blooming roses filled their surrounding areas, especially in the evening when the summer breeze was reduced to a whisper. One or two bouquets of roses would provide a feast for the eyes in a room, but their scent would provide an olfactory treat throughout the entire home. In my native state of Kansas in the late 1930's, heavenly fragrant roses were a late spring treat, and usually lasted only four to six weeks.

Nostalgic memories of yesteryear flood my memory every time I encounter a powerful rose fragrance. I especially remember the high school auditorium's temporary graduation platform heaped with baskets and buckets of spring flowers, mostly armloads of rose branches judiciously cut from climbing bushes. Few families in those days grew roses or any other flowering plants, but those who did were willing to share and show off their "green thumbs." When people entered the gym, they would take a deep breath to fully enjoy the intoxicating fragrance that filled the air. Some were so taken by the aroma that they would walk to the platform and bury their faces in the arrangements.

My gardening experiences began in 1937 when my parents purchased an old foreclosed farm that had been abandoned for years. The 160-acre quarter section allowed generous space for a large yard and garden. Early memories include rickety farm buildings surrounded by a forest of gigantic weeds, especially briars and cockleburs. The high winds seemed constant, and the work was never finished. Natural gas was our only utility, so we soon learned to function without electricity or running water. A water well was drilled about 30 feet from the house, which supplied water for our family, as well as the chickens and livestock. Every drop of water that could be recycled was collected and carefully poured around newly planted trees and bushes.

The yard cleanup was a slow process because of the years of total neglect. Large quantities of weeds and trash were hauled to an open area and burned. Our first spring yielded unexpected pleasant surprises when several perennials in our yard made their presence known. A half dozen varieties of roses somehow had survived years of neglect and choking weeds. The abused and hidden roses had also been cut off at the ground during our cleanup exercise. Two species, one yellow and one white, featured only a single row of petals. But each of their branches included dozens of flowers and created a highly desired effect on fences and trellises. Others included thumbnail-sized, double pink roses and silver-dollar-size double white. Our resurrected roses soon developed into large spreading bushes and climbers.

All farmers within a 6 mile radius of our place were considered neighbors. Several were second or third generation immigrants from Europe. My mother soon discovered that many of the original settlers had brought slips of roses from their native countries, which were then propagated dozens of times, passed down the generations, and shared with serious rose lovers. Within a few years we had just about every variety that was growing in Southeastern Kansas. Literacy was a scarce commodity, but names of several varieties were known. *Madame Hardy* and *Madame Legras* were popular, as were *Betty Prior*, *Cecile Brunner*, *American Pillar*, *Belinda* and *Buff Beauty*.

Shortly after the end of World War II my mother received a catalog in the mail that literally changed our lives. A Tyler, Texas rose nursery had included her on its mailing list. Our first order was cautious, but after the Bare-root specimens sprouted and started blooming, we were hooked. Twelve different rosebushes could be purchased for five dollars, which included postage and handling. Within five years, our garden was home to more than 200 hybrids, floribundas, grandifloras, and dozens of shrub roses, climbers and ramblers.

We experienced plenty of challenges while expanding our rose garden. Included were periodic droughts, blistering hot winds, Japanese beetles, and almost always an insufficient water supply. The

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relatively brief growing season in Kansas limits the size of a rose bush. A so-called "vigorous" Kansas hybrid tea rose would probably receive a stifled snicker from a California rosarian. Mid-western ingenuity is essential to combat a sudden early May frost, especially one that follows an unseasonably warm April. We always kept a large supply of bushel baskets, which were used to cover and keep the frost off the newly sprouted foliage. In mid-September the night time temperature would sometimes slip briefly into the low thirties for a night or two, only to be followed by two months of perfect "Indian" summer weather that would often last through mid-November. The protective baskets allowed the flowering season to continue through mid-November.

Within a few years, we had one of the most beautiful gardens in the country. Our large backyard was protected by a tree windbreak and a tall white picket fence. High, graceful arbors provided entrances to the back yard from the driveway that serviced the numerous farm buildings. Rose beds had been created by removing massive amounts of "gumbo," a term used to describe the Kansas clay that would cling to your shoes during rainy periods, but would become hard as concrete during the long, dry summers. The gumbo was replaced with rich, loamy soil that my father hauled in from enriched areas of our farm. The ideal gardening soil was plentiful wherever old straw stacks had decomposed over the decades. The locations were easy to find when our various farm crops reached maturity. The thick, lush wheat, oats, corn and other crops growing on those compost-enriched areas provided overwhelming evidence that enriched soil could make a difference. Our horses, cattle, and chickens provided an endless supply of fertilizer and nutrients that guaranteed gardening success.

Special additions added to the beauty of the garden. The acquired greenery around our home attracted numerous species of birds. Some bird species preferred houses to open nests in trees, so accommodations were provided. Two large 3-story Purple Martin birdhouses – each divided into several apartments – were mounted on 2-inch pipes about 15 feet above the multi-flowering gardens. The Martin scouts would arrive in late March and the remainder of the flock would fly in about three weeks later. These beautiful swallows would stay in the apartments about five months each year before returning to the Southern hemisphere to experience another spring and summer. Each pair of Martins would raise two families of three to six hatchlings each summer, so we contributed mightily to their population. The Martins coexisted nicely with Jenny Wrens, tiny, thumb-sized birds whose trills and songs started before sunrise and ended as night descended. The wrens' special homes were tiny hand-crafted boxes and hollow dried gourds, which were hung in the trees, trellises, and arbors. Among other birds that frequented the garden were Meadowlarks, Bobwhites, Finches, Baltimore Orioles, Scarlet Tanagers, and Hummingbirds.

During the summer months, friends and neighbors would often drop by about an hour before sunset. Many of our friends lived where paved streets radiated heat for hours after dark, and they soon learned that cooler and fragrant air was only a few miles away. The beautiful setting was meant to be shared. A large rose garden filled with floribunda and hybrid tea roses was the centerpiece for an expansive garden. Trellises supported several varieties of climbing roses, as did arbors and fences. The fringe areas were filled peonies, irises, hollyhocks, and dozens of summer annuals. About 200 years south of this setting was a small lake of nearly two acres, which lowered the hot summer breezes.

As Charlie Brown might say, "Happiness is a thriving rose garden."