



A FRAGRANT HARVEST

WHAT IS A "GARDEN" ROSE? The varieties grown at Alexandra Farms (of which many, but not all, were on display at last year's international trade fair in Bogotá, Proflora 2017) range widely in color, in form, and in their heritage—whether English, German, or French, with some varieties bred in Japan. But all share certain characteristics that historically have been associated with roses bred for the garden rather than for commercial use as cut flowers. The large heads are pregnant with abundant petals that push the flower open wide and form a richly ruffled display. Colors are often blended, combining a range of tints, tones and shadings in one flower that may evolve over the life of the flower. These "garden roses" are grown in greenhouses—but their subtle hues are just one characteristic that is reminiscent of what happens when roses are grown outdoors, subject to the influence of weather and variable light.

Of course, garden roses are also known for their fragrance, whether light and fresh or intoxicating. Fragrance is a quality that is sometimes associated with a shortened vase life—but that is the one way in which the "garden roses" offered to florists as cut flowers do not behave like most roses from a garden. In selecting varieties, Alexandra Farms will grow none that do not promise a 10-day vase life, even after five days of shipping. The performance has as much to do with growing technique, processing and packaging as with the variety.

Let's pay a visit to garden-rose grower Alexandra Farms.

Text and photography by Bruce Wright

Cut-flower trends don't just happen all by themselves. The market may be ready for something new, but it takes vision and determination to bring a brand-new product to the market—especially one as demanding as cut garden roses.

Not so long ago, the selection of roses available for wedding work consisted of... the same hybrid-tea varieties used for everyday design in white, ivory and pink. Today, an internet search for images of "wedding roses" is sure to yield plenty of deeply cupped, petal-rich varieties that practically waft their heady perfume off the screen.

It's safe to say one of the key players behind this explosion of visibility and popularity has been Joey Azout of Alexandra Farms—one of the pioneers and the largest grower, by far, of cut garden roses in the world, with twice the acreage of any other farm.

The trend began with growers in the LA area cutting field-grown roses with garden-variety characteristics and bringing them to market. "People loved them, even though they were very fragile and short-lived," says Joey. "Customers would call from New York and ask to have them shipped. But it was a niche market—not anything breeders saw

as having potential."

Around this time, however, Joey was looking for an opportunity, and he thought he saw one in garden roses. He searched out, and found, varieties that he thought could be successful with the right growing, packing, and shipping techniques. "We would go to a potential customer, and the customer would say, 'We can sell those, but you're not going to be able to produce them.' We would go to growers and they would say, 'You can produce them, but you'll never be able to sell them.' So we said, 'Wow, this might work!'"

That was in 2005. Today, on three farms totaling 20 hectares (about 50 acres), Alexandra Farms produces more than 50 varieties of cut garden roses, including 12 David Austin varieties. New varieties are constantly being tested and evaluated.

"We're not breeders," Joey clarifies. "We don't create new varieties. We test from breeders' selections." Keeping up with the trend-sensitive wedding market, however, demands constant innovation along with extraordinary effort and expertise. Come along with us for an up-close look at the attitudes and practices that have made Alexandra Farms a leader in a fast-changing market.

EXPERTISE AND OPPORTUNITY Growing garden roses is more difficult than growing ordinary cut roses by several orders of magnitude. The key is expertise and commitment. Each variety has slightly different requirements. "This is why each rose bed on the farm is assigned to a particular worker," says farm owner Joey Azout, "which also creates a sense of pride and responsibility in that person." Attracting and retaining the best workers is important for Joey. It can be challenging in Colombia, where the economy is growing and the labor market is competitive. That's one reason why Alexandra Farms offers benefits and services to farm workers such as healthy hot lunches and day care for their young children.

At Alexandra Farms, as at most Colombian flower farms, about 60% of the work force is female—a factor that has changed the social dynamic in the countryside by offering women the opportunity to earn a good wage. Alexandra Farms is one of many flower farms certified by Florverde Sustainable Flowers, the program that insures compliance with high standards of social along with environmental responsibility.



FOR VARIETIES' SAKE Although a small number of new varieties has been successful for Alexandra Farms from the beginning (the farm was founded in 2005), testing and selecting new varieties is a constant process, in part to keep up with fast-moving trends in the wedding market. The farm started with six varieties from the famous German rose breeder Tantau (including the still-popular Piano and Mariatheresia). Developed well before the market for "garden roses" had grown to its current popularity, these German varieties had the qualities of garden roses because they were intended for cut-rose production outdoors rather than in greenhouses. From there, Gallic (French) and David Austin (English) varieties were added.

Today some of the most exciting new introductions are roses bred in Japan: for example, the white rose Princess Miyuki (her name means "first snow"), which Joey holds in the photo at right, in his right hand, and Miyabi, still on the stem. Miyabi starts as a medium pink and opens to show a light pink interior. As she matures and opens, her strong petals will increase to a petal count of approximately 100 and form a ruffled rosette of concentric star shapes. Princess Miyuki has a lovely fragrance; Miyabi, however (unusually for a garden rose), has none. Another new variety is Tiara, lavender with green edges, from German breeder Spek.



HEADS AND FEET Pretty much all roses grown for the cut-flower market, whether of the garden-style variety or traditional hybrid teas, are grown from stems grafted onto rootstock. Using a trusted rootstock variety, like Natal Briar, helps to insure a vigorous, healthy plant. The rootstock is adapted to the farm's soil and climate. It reliably performs the functions of the rose plant's root system, delivering water and nutrients to the flowering cane. The cane, on the other hand, has been selected for its beauty, disease resistance, shippability and vase performance. Often enough, says Joey, "the rose varieties that have strong roots have ugly flowers, and the varieties with beautiful flowers have weak roots. So, by grafting, it's like I can keep my head but change my legs for stronger ones." He explains how it's done: "We carve a niche in the rootstock bark and insert a budwood stalk from the other variety. Plastic wrap holds it in place. Then we bend the rootstock forward. The plant says, 'I'm not going to send too much nutrient to the part of me that's bent over; I'm going to send it mainly to the part that's growing up toward the sun.'" Workers from Ecuador, skilled in grafting, come to the farm once a year just to perform this function for the big planting in September or October that supplies production for the wedding season in the following year. In the photo, the graft is just two weeks old; the red leaves are new.



KID GLOVES One of the labor-intensive strategies employed by growers of premium roses is to cover the buds of certain varieties with mesh mitts or nets. Mesh protects the roses from pests like thrips, without the use of chemical pesticides; it is even fine enough to keep spores of botrytis mold from getting through. Blue mitts (sometimes black, red or green) filter out some of the ultraviolet rays of the sun, protecting red varieties that may otherwise tend to get black around the edges of the petals. Garden-style roses aren't the only cut roses that might receive such kid-glove treatment. But they are the finickiest of all. "We've had to adapt our growing techniques to each variety we produce," says Joey. "But if it's a beautiful variety we want to find a way to make it work."

TALKING ABOUT GARDEN ROSES

The world of garden roses has its own vocabulary. These aren't precisely defined technical terms, but they come in handy as a way of describing and becoming familiar with the characteristics of different varieties. Here are a few, not mutually exclusive terms, relating mostly to the shape of the flower.



CABBAGE Broadly describes a large, fat, round, many-petaled rose. Caramel Antike would be a classic example.



CUP The cup shape is a distinctive feature of many garden roses. In its best-defined form, longer petals on the outside of the rose enfold and enclose shorter, ruffled petals in the center. The peach-colored David Austin variety Juliet offers a good example of a deep cup.



QUARTERED Look at Pink O'Hara, and the term "quartered" as applied to garden roses becomes clear: the frilly petals are clearly divided into four sections, each with its own spiral shape.



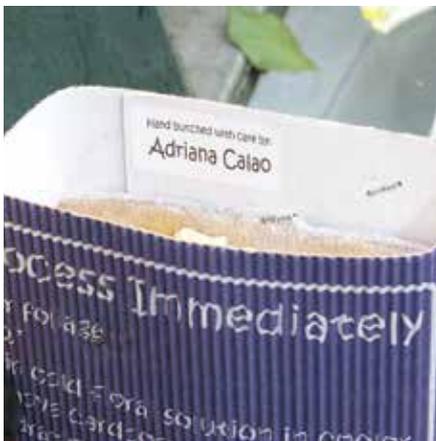
ROSETTE Some garden roses are of the rosette type, with a flatter, more spreading shape, like the ballet-pink German variety Mariatheresia. The term suggests a multitude of tiny petals arranged with radial symmetry.



THE RIGHT CUT An essential skill for those who harvest cut flowers is knowing exactly when to cut—and if that’s true for cut flowers in general, it’s three times as true for garden roses. “They need a very particular point of cut,” says Joey. “Too soon, the rose will not open. Too late, and it will blow open or bruise

during shipping. Most flower farms cut once a day. We cut three times a day to make sure we get it at the right point.” The right cut point varies from one variety to another. So, to help workers identify when each rose is ready, pictures of the ideal cut point are posted in every greenhouse block.

This set of pictures is in a block where new varieties are being grown in “pre-commercial” quantities of only about 1,000 blooms. “That means the rose isn’t commercially available yet, but we have enough that we can really measure how it will perform and send samples to customers,” Joey explains.



A BETTER WAY Empowering workers to propose innovations and make changes is a strategy that has worked well at Alexandra Farms. “We weren’t satisfied with our system for processing the roses, so we asked our employees for suggestions and solutions to problems,” says Joey—seen here with employees Adriana Calao and Alcira Rojas. “They came up with a whole new system that’s far more productive and efficient. By implementing their ideas, we went from 200 stems bunched per hour to 230. But the biggest benefit was in improved quality. Our flowers are very delicate. Before, we had 7% mechanical damage. That went down to 2%.” Among the changes, employees proposed a work cabinet with a top made of glass so they can see right away where everything is and when supplies are getting low. Everything needed is within reach: rubber bands, tags that identify the rose variety. Metal guides help make the bunching process more efficient; a mirror at one end (a worker’s innovation) makes it easy to check that the bunch is uniform. Every bunch is “signed” like a work of art by the employee who makes it, instilling a sense of pride in the work.

BY THE DOZEN "Our bunches are smaller than other farms', because we don't want to pack so many roses together," says Joey. Depending on what the customer wants, some have all the rose heads visible from the top of the bunch, others have the same 12 flowers, but at two levels. Cardboard dividers are wrapped in sheets of thin, flexible Styrene to protect the flowers.



PRETTY AS A PICTURE A new Alexandra Farms logo is launching this year, inspired by the renowned botanical illustrator, Pierre-Joseph Redouté. Joey tells the story: "In the early 1800s, Napoleon and Josephine Bonaparte didn't get along too well, so she was sent to live in the chateau of Malmaison in the south of France, where the climate was perfect for growing roses. She loved them, and she amassed a huge collection of 300 varieties. Only, these were not perpetuals—they would bloom maybe once a year, twice if you're lucky. Dignitaries would visit her and she was frustrated that she couldn't show all the varieties in her collection. So she hired Redouté, the best in the world, to make detailed paintings of them, one by one." Today the work of Redouté is iconic, the classic representation of the allure and variety of garden roses.



BY CONTRAST Golden Mustard is brand new to Alexandra Farms and the first variety they have taken on that is technically not a "garden rose." Why? "It's in the shape," Joey explains. "It's more of a spiral, with center petals that are longer than the outer petals, which is typical for a hybrid tea rose, even though this is not that. Most of our roses are not spiral but cup shapes, or ball shapes, or cabbage shapes." (See page 14 for more on the terms used to describe garden roses.) Bred by Interplant, Golden Mustard also has no fragrance to speak of. "But the color is so unique and so perfect for weddings that we just had to have it."



FROM HERE TO THERE Workers who grade the roses for head size and length are also trained to double-check the cut point, ensuring uniformity in the bunch. Grading and bunching are assembly-line work—but the well-lit room where the

work is done is hung with colorful flags showing all the countries that Alexandra Farms roses are exported to, and with photos of happy brides from all over the world—a reminder to employees of the meaningful big picture.

SPECIAL ROSES, SPECIAL CARE

Care and handling for cut garden roses is not fundamentally different from how you would process other roses. When garden roses arrive in the shop:

- Take the individual bunches out of the box and separate them. Leaving the protective packaging in place, cut the rose stems individually with a sharp knife or clipper.
- Place the bunches into cold water mixed with flower

food and move them immediately into the cooler. After 2 to 3 hours, remove the inner packaging—the cardboard and Styrene—to give the rose heads room to breathe and begin to open up. Leave the outer cellophane packaging on the bunches, to protect and support the flowers. Allow another 4 to 5 hours' slow hydration, up to 12 hours total.

- Remove the roses from the

cooler. Remove the cellophane from the bunches and leave them out at room temperature so they can begin to open up. Replenish flower food water as needed. Ideally, separate each variety into its own clean bucket or vase, and monitor all varieties as they open. When flowers reach the desired stage of development, replace them into the cooler until you are ready to use them.

The most common mistake

that retailers and designers make with cut garden roses is not giving them enough time to open fully. Typically, cut garden roses should arrive 4 or 5 days before a wedding. A reference guide is provided on the Alexandra Farms website with photos that show characteristic stages of openness, day by day, for the most popular varieties:

www.alexandrafarms.com