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SURVIVORS ALL

Buck roses win praise for toughness and beauty

By Sally Ruth Bourrie

You've probably never heard of Griffith Buck or the no-pampering-needed roses he developed.

The Iowa State University professor hybridized roses from 1948 to 1985 with one goal: plants that could survive the winter in his blizzard-prone Zone 5 state. He got that, and more.

Since Buck neither sprayed nor watered his test beds, and he uprooted any plants that dropped diseased foliage, only the strongest survived. He bred the surviving cold-hardy roses. He also got no-fuss, fungus-resistant, drought-tolerant shrub roses, some heavily fragrant.

So why are Buck's 87 dream hybrids such a secret?

Buck, who died in 1991, was a breeder, not a marketer. He named and registered his roses with the American Rose Society so fellow rose growers could use and sell them, which a few smaller growers did. He also gave many to friends. But Buck avoided the time-consuming process of patenting, which large distributors want, for all but a couple of his hybrids. Buck preferred rose-work to paperwork.

Another reason: Iowa State, in Buck's hometown of Ames, plowed up his rose test field after he retired. Buck saw his life's work tilled under. "He was quite dejected," says his widow, Ruby Buck, who had watched her husband's delight as he developed roses as easy to grow as iris, all the while taking shots to control his rose allergies.

But you can't keep a good rose down.

The rediscovery of Buck roses is thanks largely to Kathy Zuzek, research scientist at the Minnesota Landscape Arboretum, the main research center for Buck roses at the University of Minnesota. It has the world's largest collection of them, along with Buck's notes and papers. Zuzek wanted to develop roses to survive Minnesota's winters -- that's when she learned Buck already had done the work for her. She just had to track down his roses. With Buck's notes and help from his family, she has located, named and propagated about 60 of the plants since 1992. A dozen are extinct.

But they are the wave of the future, predicts John Clements, owner of Heirloom Roses in St. Paul, Ore., who grows Buck roses in his display garden.

"The roses weren't appreciated because he wasn't a company and a big-name breeder," says Clements. "Now that he's dead, his roses are getting much higher appreciation. I'm amazed at some of them."

Most are pink, although there are reds, whites and yellows. They often have stippling or dramatic color changes from bud to bloom. Some are heavily fragrant, which Clements attributes in part to the parentage of David Austin's 'The Yeoman.'

In Zone 5 country, Heather Figg's Spokane, Wash., cottage garden is packed with about 20 different Bucks. She's loved them since she was a child when she became acquainted with some in her aunt's garden. Figg, who seldom sprays, has seen only occasional black spot. "I have no trouble with them."

Larry Parton, who owns Northland Rosarium in Spokane, carries Buck roses because they're so hardy, though he doesn't think that's their prime attraction. He's drawn by their colors, bloom times and thick shape. Unlike most varieties, Buck roses gain momentum through summer, with prolific blooms in August and September.

The variety names are another matter. Many -- named for Buck's family and friends -- aren't exactly sales boosters, says Parton, whose favorite is called 'Dorcas.' Buck named the carmine-streaked, azalea-pink shrub after a television reporter on whose show he appeared. Other names like 'Prairie Harvest,' 'Do-Si-Do' and 'Frontier Twirl' reflect Buck's Midwestern roots.

Tough, beautiful and fragrant, the reputation of Buck roses is spreading.

The American Rose Society named 'Winter Sunset,' an apricot-blend Buck rose with large, dark green, glossy foliage, its top new shrub rose for 2000. And Iowa State University has tried to rectify plowing up Buck's test gardens. It planted the Griffith Buck Collection of roses in a section of the public gardens at the entrance to the university.

"In reflecting back on my achievements in rose breeding, I am quite satisfied," Buck once said. "The only thing that would make me happier is that more people would learn how easy they are to grow."

Buck would be happy these days. The secret of his roses is out.

Sally Ruth Bourrie is a Portland free-lance writer who can be reached at sbourrie@prodigy.net.

To learn more

Visit the Buck rose Web site, www.ag.iastate.edu/centers/cad/rose1.html

Sources

Heirloom Roses
24062 N.E. Riverside Drive
St. Paul
503-538-1576
www.heirloomroses.com

Northland Rosarium
9405 South Williams Lane
Spokane, WA 99224
509-448-4968

Rose Guardians
P.O. Box 426
St. Paul, 97137
503-393-1051
(Mail order only)

Buck roses for the Northwest garden

Favorites from John Clements, Ruby Buck, Heather Figg and Larry Parton:

*'April Moon,' yellow

'Applejack,' pink, with foliage that smells like apples

'Amiga Mia,' pale pink with yellow center

'Aunt Honey,' deep red

*'Autumn Dusk,' reddish-pink, fragrant

'Carefree Beauty,' medium pink that lightens with age, light damask scent, orange hips, blooms all summer

'Country Dancer,' deep pink, blooms continually

'Distant Drums,' mauve flower with a beige center

'Dorcas,' azalea-pink with carmine-red streaks

'Earth Song,' cool pink, particularly resistant to black spot

'Hawkeye Belle,' pink-tinted, very double, particularly resistant to black spot

*'Malaguena,' geranium pink

'Paloma Blanca,' blush-tinted and very double, the closest to pure white Buck achieved, particularly resistant to black spot

'Prairie Harvest,' yellow

'Sevilliana,' fragrant, light claret color with red "freckles" and golden center

'Winter Sunset,' apricot blend

* Will mildew