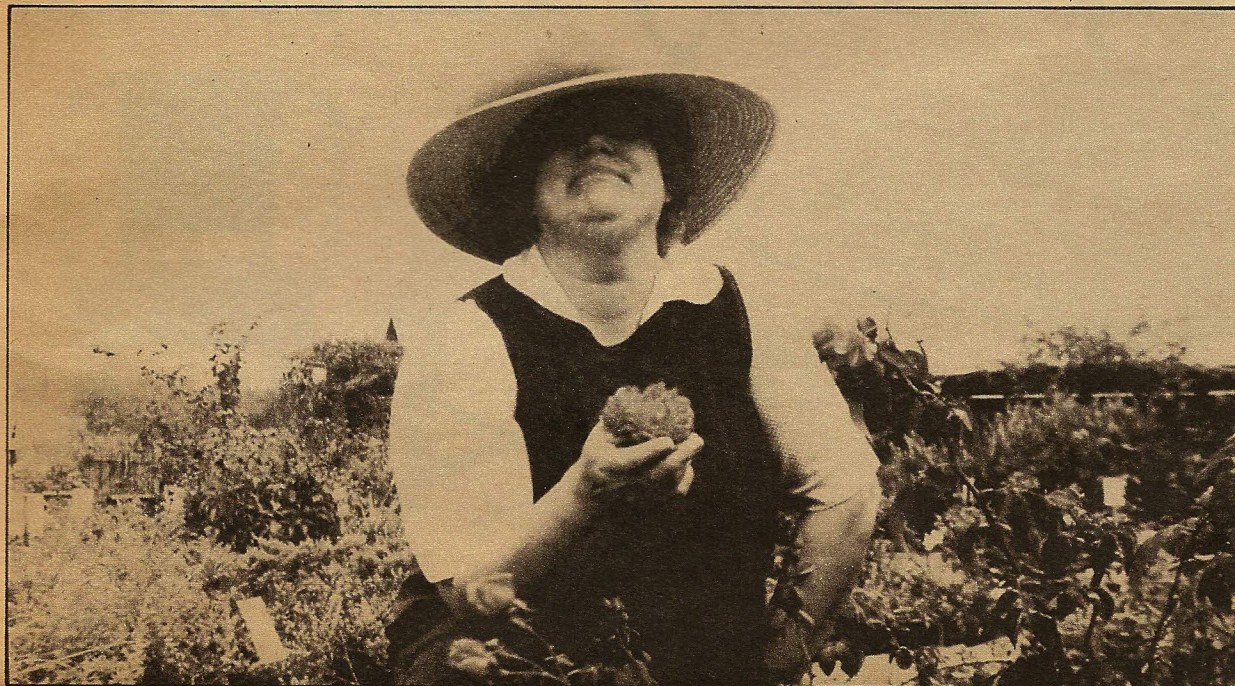


# RUSTLED ROSES

... and related rosarian revelations

Smithsonian News Service/Suzanne O'Connell



Pamela Puryear, a founder of the Texas Rose Rustlers, wearing her infamous

fat rose-and-tulle hat, holds "Maggie," a fragrant, ever-blooming old rose.

**I**t's Bill Welch speaking: "Old roses don't need all that much attention. They have to have some sun, and you have to keep the critters from browsing. Of course, you don't have many browsers in Washington, D.C." He lingers over the thought ever so tantalizingly and adds, "unless you count the lobbyists."

Dr. William Welch, landscape horticulturist with the Texas Agricultural Extension service, partisan of old roses and pluperfect practitioner of legendary Texas hospitality, is having a little fun with his guests from the nation's capital. Sent by the Smithsonian News Service to Navasota, Texas, and environs to cover the ninth annual "Old Rose Rustle," this reporter is bound for Weimar, along with husband Bob, who is handling the horsepower, Pamela Puryear, historian and self-described "lily-in-the-field," and Welch. Moving across rolling countryside peppered with oaks, pecans and yaupon holly and populated with cattle, fire ants and armadillos, the group is on the trail of horticultural history.

The Texas Rose Rustlers are riding out in all manner of vehicles to "round

up" antique roses — many of them around for at least 100 years. Some are descendants of roses that may have been growing somewhere on Earth thousands of years ago. The American Rose Society defines an old rose as a variety introduced before the debut in 1867 of the first Hybrid Tea Rose, the seductive, silvery-pink "La France."

For much of the 20th century, the popularity of the Hybrid Tea, so familiar in gardens and flower shops today, pushed the old rose classes with such names as China, Gallica and Hybrid Perpetual out of sight, out of mind and out of commerce.

"Thousands of varieties have been lost," Margaret Sharpe says. "We know of many that once existed by looking in the old garden catalogs." The chairwoman of the Texas Rose Rustlers is ever optimistic, however. "Occasionally, somebody comes up with one that's been missing." The lure of coming up with a rare find spurs rose rustlers on.

Ink Mendelsohn writes for the Smithsonian News Service.

The Texas Rose Rustlers and other rosarians belong to a nationwide fellowship, the Heritage Roses Group, that aims to preserve, propagate and popularize old roses. Once again appearing in a growing number of nurseries are such favorites of yesteryear as "American Beauty," a Hybrid Perpetual that Diamond Jim Brady sent actress Lillian Russell by the roomful to express his love. "Old Blush," a China rose in Europe after 1752 but thought to have been cultivated in China for many centuries, is also popular.

It was love at first sight for Pam Puryear when, in 1969, she spotted "Old Blush" — although she did not then know it by name — in front of an abandoned log cabin. "Old Blush" was, she recalls fondly, "blooming its head off" in the thick August heat of central Texas, "and it hadn't rained for months. At the time, I was being sweet as pie to 'Sterling Silver' (a Hybrid Tea rose), and all I had to show for it was three brown sticks." Puryear dug up her plentifully flowering pink prize and transplanted it to her yard, where it continues its promiscuous blooming ways. Thus the appeal of old roses. "A rose should exist to please you, not to please it," Puryear advises.

It wasn't exactly the war of roses, but in years past "old rosers" and the American Rose Society folks haven't been on the same side of the garden fence. "Those fellows wanted to grow those exotic things with leaves as big as your hand and blooms like cabbages," Puryear says, describing the ARS emphasis on extravagant Hybrid Teas.

"The ARS was started by nurserymen and growers who were interested in marketing new varieties," Barbara Whitford, the chairwoman of the society's Old Rose Committee, relates. "But times change, and today the ARS is much more accepting of old roses than it used to be. We have the Hudson Old Rose Garden at our headquarters in Shreveport, La., and often as many as 30 old-rose categories in our ARS National Rose Shows."

Sub rosa, however, there remains an undercurrent of partisan feelings. "I plant old and new roses because I like variety," Whitford says, "but there are lots of rosarians who wouldn't have an old rose in the garden."

More and more gardeners are interested in heritage roses, nurseryman Mike Shoup finds. Shoup and his wife, Jean, specialize in the historic blooms at their Antique Rose Emporium in Brenham. They raise and sell more than 400 differ-

ent varieties, a number of which they have propagated from cuttings collected by the Rose Rustlers.

"With all the inbreeding and crossbreeding of the Hybrid Teas, trying to get a perfect flower and long stems, such vital qualities as fragrance and disease resistance often have been lost," Shoup explains. Throughout the 19th century, breeders tried to create a yellow rose. At last they succeeded, but with Rayon d'Or — the first yellow Hybrid Tea — came an epidemic of black spot that still blights roses today. "Most old roses are hardier, have a true rose fragrance and are easier to care for," Shoup says.

"I water them the first year, and then they're on their own," Raleigh, N.C., horticulturist Charles Walker says of the old roses he grows from cuttings rooted directly in open ground. "Chemicals? I just don't bother with them." Walker's secret for successful old-rose growing is to choose varieties that demonstrably flourish in one's area. "Mother Nature has already done the weeding-out for you."

The history of roses began long before the evolution of Homo sapiens. Just how far back into prehistoric time rose roots reach is uncertain, but recognizable roses have been found in 32-million-year-old fossil deposits in Colorado and Oregon. Some roses are native to the United States, but most evolved in the Middle East, Europe and Asia. Over the centuries, species roses — those occurring naturally in the temperate zone — were cross-pollinated by nature's agents: insects, birds, water and wind, creating new varieties. Some horticultural historians speculate that garden cultivation of roses began in China some 5,000 years ago.

European botanists, in the late 18th century searching for worthy garden plants, discovered in China and the Far East roses that, unlike their own once-blooming types, bloomed continuously. Plant sexuality was at this time becoming better understood. Botanists and horticulturists discovered that hybridization — the process by which pollen from one plant is placed on the receptive pistil of another, ultimately creating an "offspring" different from its "parents" — could be accomplished manually, without waiting for nature to take its quixotic course.

The Orientals — Chinas and Teas — were crossed with the European classes — Gallicas, Musks, Centifolias and Dam-

asks. Born were such new classes of roses as Noisettes, Bourbons, Portlands, Polyanthas, Hybrid Perpetuals, Hybrid Musks and the Hybrid Teas.

There were more than 1,000 cultivars — varieties of roses under cultivation — by the beginning of the 19th century. Exhaustive hybridization and technical advances in rose-growing created a seemingly endless rose parade in Victorian nurseries.

Rose petals have marked a colorful trail of American history: the White Damask planted by the Pilgrims in 1621; the red-and-white-striped "Rosa Mundi" planted by Jefferson at Monticello; the pink rose of Castile brought to California from Spain by a French expedition; the purple, pink and white "Cherokee" roses planted by that tribe along a Texas trail, and the "Yellow Banksia" — thought to be the yellow rose of Texas — that made its way from China to Mexico and settled happily in Texas.

Meanwhile, back at the ranch in

Weimar, shears at the ready to clip the slips that might make history, the rustlers are circling about "Mrs. Dudley Cross," a Tea rose at the home of Annie Martinez. At Lawrence Rose's cottage, there is a cream-colored rose, perhaps a China-Bourbon cross. Until it can be identified, it gets the study name "Lawrence Rose" — a true case of "a rose is a rose." At a dormered Victorian, the du-dette from Washington gets her big chance to study-name an unknown. "How about 'Meantime'?" she asks. And "Weimar's Meantime China" it becomes.

As the sun sets on Weimar, a rose-sated company heads for the local inn for refreshment and remembrances of rustles past. Pam recalls that "first real bonanza" — Bellville citizen Raymond Fisher's collection of roses inherited from his Austin County forebears. Two years later, Fisher died, and his garden was bulldozed. But the likes of "Cramoisi Superieur," and "Paul's Scarlet" now live on in other gardens.



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A rose revolution swept the Victorian world as advances in rose growing created *The Passion for Roses*, shown in this 19th-century lithograph.