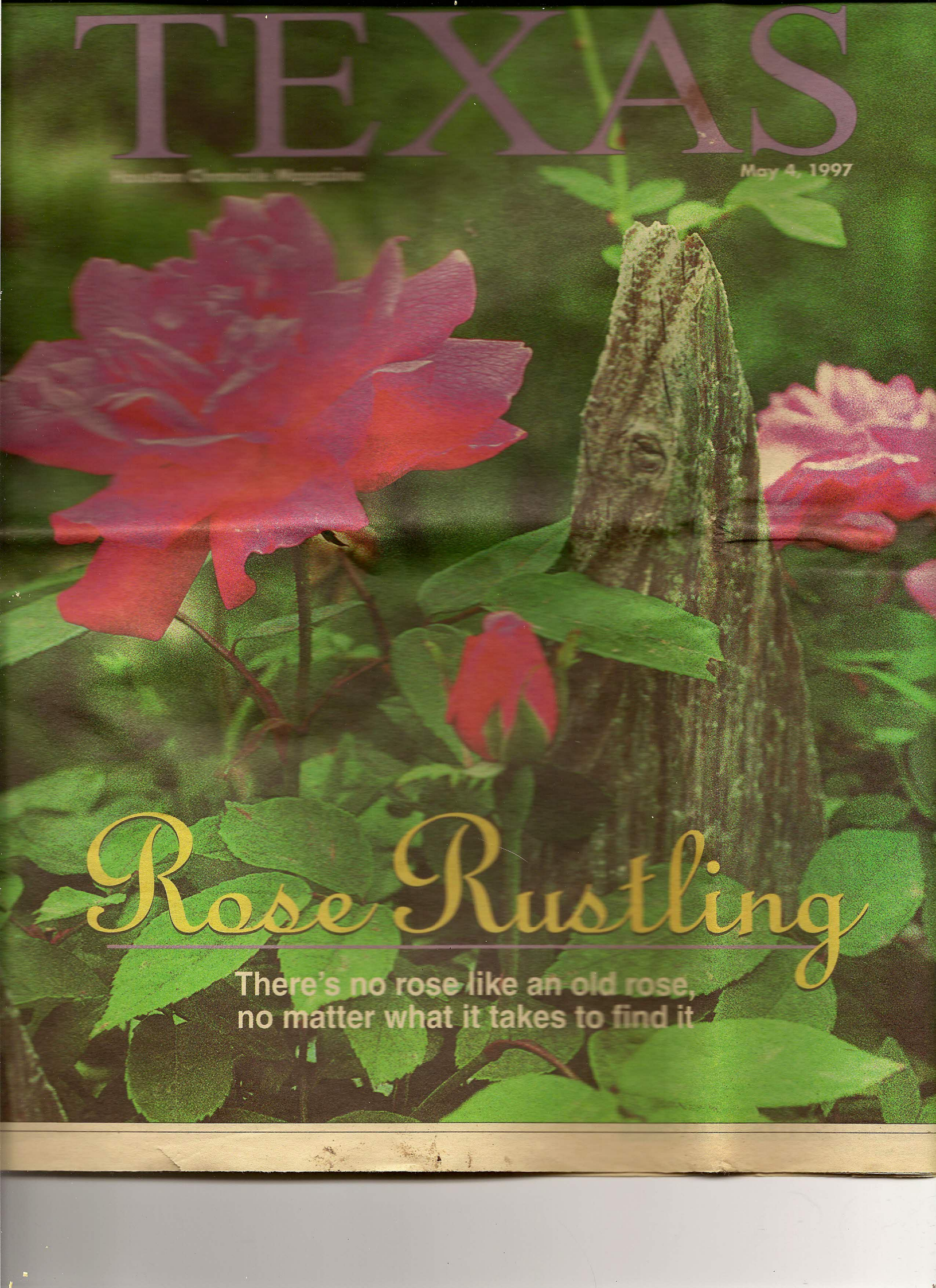


# TEXAS

Houston Chronicle Magazine

May 4, 1997



## Rose Rustling

There's no rose like an old rose,  
no matter what it takes to find it

**T**here are plenty of ways to take an interest in old roses. You can zero in on them botanically, or you can fit their stories into the history of your favorite place, or you can simply appreciate the way they act in the landscape. All these approaches have their proponents — have had, in fact, almost since old roses were new.

But my own attraction to old roses — and the act of rustling — began more in the spirit of plunder. Searching out, digging up, rooting, trading, or otherwise *taking* plants is closely related to thrift shopping and junking, two sports I play passionately.

I picked Texas for my old rose pilgrimage because Texas is where the art of rustling was invented. The original Texas rose rustlers went deep into the province of old ladies, cut a wide swath around the fussiness and classification of the rose world, and found adventure.

**A**t a cafe on the way to the Antique Rose Emporium in Independence, Texas, I fell into a greasy reverie — fried eggs, white toast, home fries, bacon and all that good bad food — while watching a grizzled short-order cook who had a Marlboro hanging from the corner of her mouth. Two waitresses lounged at opposite ends of the counter. At the tables, people were integrated: half and half, black and white. The pace was slow, verging on tropical.

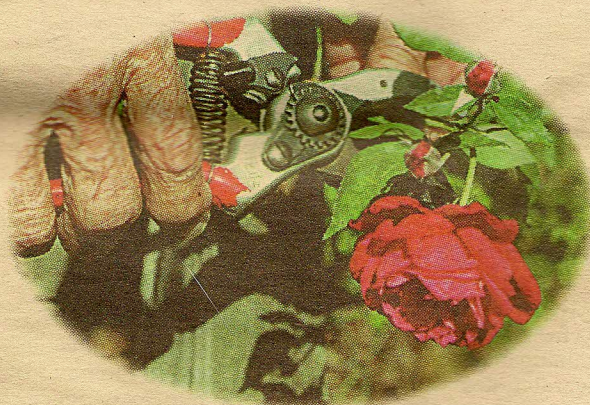
Back on the road, the heat came at me in a cloud. Crossing the Washington County line took me into a very old part of Texas, the actual headquarters of the Republic during the ten years (1836-1846) when Texas was its own little nation. They were exciting years, and Texans are not about to forget them. Washington County is full of old buildings done up as stores for tourists, selling ducks with ribbons around their necks, historic cheese graters and constipation remedies left behind by ordinary people of long ago. Restorations are everywhere.

The Antique Rose Emporium (A.R.E.) has four historically correct log cabins on its five-acre grounds, each of them covered with climbing roses, which clamber aggressively into windows, up telephone poles, and over arches. In between the roses are meadows, ponds, winding stone pathways, and perennial beds, all oversized and run-down-on-purpose. It looks as if some very energetic but slightly wild Texan of the Republican period had gone crazy at the local nursery and then died, leaving all his plantings to naturalize however they pleased.

The fact that what you see here you can grow at home is what has made Mike Shoup and his Antique Rose Emporium such a success. The established old-rose breeders have been mailing catalogs to the initiated for decades, but if you don't already know roses inside and out, getting through the botanical descriptions and pen-and-ink drawings can be intimidating. So Mike Shoup set up his empire as a place where neophytes could find guidance. Every rose in his vast display gardens has at least a paragraph of simple information attached to it, and each narrow flagstone path leads to a sort of rose diorama. The A.R.E. catalog is full of color photographs and how-to. Best of all, no matter how stunning the rose, Mike won't carry it if it's temperamental.

The approach works. The A.R.E. is currently the country's largest grower of "own-root" roses

# Old Roses AND FRAGRANT RESCUES



They call themselves rose rustlers, scouring the Texas countryside for cuttings of hardy, sweet-smelling old roses, no matter where they grow. Robin Chotzinoff captures the flavor and excitement of the hunt in this excerpt from her book *People With Dirty Hands: The Passion for Gardening*.

— ungrafted old garden roses are generally thought to be more authentic. His staff — which once consisted of himself, his wife, and a propagation expert — now numbers thirty, all of whom stand ready to answer questions, no matter how stupid.

Mike is a big man — a lumberjack/dad type with a heavy beard — and the heat was killing him. But he walked me through every row of plants on that hill, pinching rose blossoms off plants and tossing them back to me.

"Here's Mermaid," he said, throwing a fragile white rose with a yellow center. "Here's Perle D'Or. Smell it — it's actually kind of rosy smelling, isn't it?"

My hands filled up with flowers. I began stuffing them into my pockets and down the front of my shirt. (When I got undressed that evening, petals fell out.) I could have stayed out on the wholesale hill all day, but Mike was wiping his forehead with a bandanna. He had had enough.

We retreated to his office, an old but refreshingly unrestored house, complete with a sagging porch beneath which a spaniel lay splayed out in the dirt. Inside, old metal desks and the remains of a birthday cake were scattered about. It was about as far as it could be from the deliberately charming atmosphere of the Emporium but a good place to put your feet up and leaf through the selection of old hardback books with the word "rose" in their titles. Before Mike could crack open his Diet Pepsi, though, a visitor arrived.

The man at the door told us his name was Wamon Foster, that he was eighty years old, that he had seen Mike on a TV news show, and that he had driven a hundred miles to get here.

"Can I help you?" Mike asked him.

"Why no," Wamon Foster replied, "I brung you something." He held out a bouquet of roses wrapped in soggy brown paper. "Hits a deep red rose," he said, "and I'm fixin' to tell you something. That rose have run all over that washhouse out in back. The fronds done got fourteen foot tall. When I saw you on TV, I said to my wife, why, I'm goin' take that washhouse rose down to him."

Mike tried to figure out what the rose might be. Nine times out of ten, he said, these offerings turn out to be something old, but common. "Does it look like this one?" he asked Mr. Foster, showing him a picture. "No? How about this one here?"

"Hit's way darker than that," Mr. Foster replied, "and it repeats. And you can root it. I took about five, six cuttings last year and stuck 'em in a pot, and then I run off on a trip. And one was living when I came back."

"Do you know anyone else that has one?"

"I do," Mr. Foster said. "Over at the cemetery near us I saw one, and the woman working that grave, that was her grandfather's plot, and he and that rose had been there since 1892."

"Well, we'll root it and see what happens, and let you know," Mike said. "What you want us to call your rose?"

Mr. Foster seemed a little taken aback. "Why, I'm Wamon Foster," he finally said, "but I surely don't want you to call it the Wamon Foster Rose." Eventually they settled on Darby Holehausen Cemetery Repeating Red Climber.

After Mr. Foster left, Mike attached a scrawled note to the cuttings and put them in the office refrigerator for his propagator to find. He closed the door on them slowly — they are what matters to him at work. The propagation of roses, he told



Mike Shoup tends flowers at his Antique Rose Emporium in Independence offer registered names for the old roses he found, Shoup invent

me, is infinitely more adventuresome than sowing hybrid marigold seeds and watching them turn into bedding plants, which is what he used to do before his life got interesting.

A run-of-the-mill greenhouse made business sense, though, in 1976, the year he left Texas A&M, with a horticulture degree. Horticulturists run greenhouses, he thought, and his hometown of Independence seemed as good a place as any to start out.

"It was boom years," he told me. "You couldn't not make money in Texas." Mike took the straightforward approach, growing the usual array of marigolds, zinnias, impatiens, and petunias. Five years later he had a blooming business capable of supporting himself, his wife, and three children in style. The next thing he knew he was "so disenchanted. What I was doing," he said, "was nothing but mass manufacturing."

There seemed to be no way to reconcile his love of hands-in-the-dirt gardening with the business of bedding plants, a business that had been good enough to him that he could hardly afford to cut it off midstream. Finally, he thought he might try raising native Texan plants. If they could survive his county's brutal, windy heat, he thought, they could flourish as landscape plants. Xeriscaping and native gardens were not unheard of in Texas at the time, but they hadn't arrived in his part of the country yet. Wondering whether anyone would pay money for plants some people thought of as weeds made Mike nervous, but he didn't let that stop him.

"I went out into the landscape with my wife, looking for plants we knew would survive," Mike recalled. "We found some perennials, things like dianthus and bouncing bet. But mainly, we saw roses — in cemeteries, old fence rows, abandoned houses. Blooming. Where they weren't being cared for."

Until then, Mike had always thought you couldn't grow a rose without fussing over it, which is why he never liked roses much. "I thought they were gaudy and a pain. They got mildew, black spot, aphids, but these abandoned roses were different. These roses shouldn't even share the same name."

What Mike came to feel for those tough roses was nothing less than passion. He loved everything about old garden roses — even their less lovable traits.

"They grow like ground cover, like shrubs, like hedges, they even grow up into trees," he told me. Some — the polyanthas and chinas, in particular — bloom all season. Others flower for only a few weeks in spring, and then, just to be difficult, break out in hooked thorns. Old rose fragrances are persistent, and their ability to survive disease and neglect is remarkable. And yet, as far as Mike could tell, most of the roses he found were headed for extinction.

"What happened was that breeders in the forties and fifties stopped caring about anything but the flowers," Mike said. "They wanted the flowers perfect, for winning shows and all that. Along the way, they bred out disease resistance, fragrance, and beauty of form. People who grew roses began to put them in straight lines so they could be sprayed every day. But you go back to the old periodicals, and you find pictures of roses completely covering a house, wild in the landscape."

Perhaps it was that tendency that breeders hoped to tone down. In 1867, when hybrid teas were first developed, they indeed seemed to be a breakthrough, blooming repeatedly all season,



John Everett / Chronicle  
When no one could  
his own.

with strong rather than floppy necks and just one bloom per stem. The roses themselves had a new look — they unfolded slowly, from a tight ball of bud, like tulips, instead of exploding open, shedding petals along the way, as they had in the past.

The result was the perfect flower to stick in a vase — but not the kind of flowers that got Mike excited. What he wanted was “a return to wildness, in the landscape and in the roses.”

In the ensuing two years, Mike collected about a hundred “found” roses, which he placed in the hands of a university-trained propagator.

When no one could offer registered names for the old roses he found, Mike invented his own. He christened Red Burglar — a thorny climber that had actually trapped a thief trying to enter an old woman’s house — and Highway 290 Pink Buttons, rustled by the road’s shoulder. There was the Martha Gonzales rose, which had grown in Mike’s hometown ever since old Mrs. Gonzales could remember, in soil so terrible it hadn’t produced a blade of grass in decades. All three, plus some ninety more rustled roses, were listed in Mike’s first catalog, issued in 1984.

Technically, the roses he offers are not antique — a term that applies only to roses bred before 1867, the year hybrid teas were developed — nor even necessarily old. They merely have to have old garden rose qualities. The point is not to produce perfect roses at perfect intervals, but to fill the landscape with something beautifully carefree — in the form of roses even a scatter-brained gardener could grow.

Mike remembers the first catalog as expensive to produce and “pretty rinky-dink” in quality, but customers responded to its complete growing instructions and close-up color photographs of every rose listed. You didn’t have to be an expert to understand it, and Mike offered his readers something entirely new — a service to which gardeners could send clippings, which were then propagated and grown until they bloomed, at which point the A.R.E. staff either identified them as historical roses or gave them new names. (Some of those donated roses are mainstays of the catalog today.) News of the rose detective agency spread through Texas, where it soon came to the attention of two women who’d been rustling roses when Mike was still in college.

They’d been at it before anyone else,” he says of Pam Puryear and Margaret Sharpe. “They were the original players.” Players is right. Pam Puryear and Margaret Sharpe were the first to play this scientific pursuit as a game.

**A**t the end of June, I reach Pam Puryear by phone. It is, she tells me, the beginning of air-conditioning and the end of rose rustling until fall.

“It’s just too hot,” she says breathlessly, in a deep Southern drawl. “The hollyhocks are ten feet tall, you can’t hardly see the blooms, and I am just fighting with the weeds. I’ve got herbs growing in our old clay tennis court, it’s from 1912, you know, with eight inches of cinders and the drainage is just perfect. Boy howdy, you can’t fertilize it, though, it goes right through to the Gulf of Mexico that same day.”

Miz Puryear could happily spend hours going off on any number of tangents — from old tennis court design to erosional trends in Texas. Over the years, she has written scholarly monographs for university presses on such disparate topics as Victorian women’s underwear and the history



Will Van Overbeek

Pam Puryear's first find, Old Blush, made her crazy for old roses "because it pleases the viewer, and you don't have to give up your life to please it."

of steamboating on the Brazos River. She is the type of person who, when discussing the fifties, usually means the 1850s.

Pam casts herself as the unmarried high school English teacher in her late forties, faint of health, vaguely eccentric, and still living among the ruins of the Puryear estate, built by her great-grandfather in 1869.

"It sounds wonderful, I know, but it's all falling down," she says. "I live alone with my widowed mother and twenty-three fat cats. Having given up teaching ten years ago — "high blood pressure troubles," she says — she now works behind the counter "scaring tourists" at an antique store. The job scarcely pays the bills, but Pam isn't worried. "I picked out a rich man to marry and I got to finally go over to his place and tell him about it," she explains.

If that plan falls through, she's content to become a character in her own family history, known for her ceaseless pottering in the circa 1871 greenhouse. Like the rest of her family compound, it's headed back into the dirt, but Pam can think of worse fates. You can grow things in dirt, and doing that is in her blood.

"It's an obsession, all right," she agrees, "if an obsession is an inordinate desire. My grandmother taught me about gardening. She taught me that if you skim the weeds off the top, they'll come back up from the bottom. She was very Victorian. Her ideal was vast expanses of lawn with specimen shrubs dotted around — red, pink, red, pink. She didn't have bad taste, she had no taste."

Under her grandmother's direction, Pam dabbled in annual flowers and herbs — even a few roses, but they made her frantic. "Hybrid teas are impossible," she recalls. "They're made for cool, wet summers, and around here we generally have three cold days and a heck of a lot of hot ones. Hybrid teas take one look at that and commit suicide."

Throughout her teens and early twenties, Pam struggled with them anyway, "taking their little pHs, fussing with their soil," until one day in 1970, when she took a trip through the countryside looking for old buildings.

"We went to see a wonderful 1822 log house up on a bluff," she remembers. "It was about to be moved off the site, and lord, it was covered with clapboard and no one had lived there since 1940. Out front were two old rosebushes. Here it was August, in the middle of a three-year drought, and these rosebushes were blooming their heads off. I thought, what am I doing trying to pamper my roses when this one here ain't even been cared for since 1940?"

A few days later, Pam went back and dug the plants up. She gave one to the woman who owned the land, planted one in her own back yard, and gave some cuttings to a friend. "And those cuttings became a hundred-and-twenty foot hedge that stopped traffic," she says. "That old rose rooted like a sweet potato."

Which is probably why she began to notice it all over the county. People told her it was called Old Pink Daily or Common Monthly. Her own horticultural research revealed its real name: Old Blush. It had first come to Europe from China in 1752, and as far as she could tell, it had come to Texas from Europe, its cuttings kept moist in a wet towel or a raw potato.

Old Blush made Pam crazy for old roses — "because it pleases the viewer," she says, "and you don't have to give up your life to please it." Certain that there were other sympathetic roses



When she moved to Houston, Margaret Sharpe turned from just trying to find antique roses for historic government buildings

to be had, Pam read all the old rose journals and catalogs she could find, and when she got tired of reading, she designed and built "an extremely primitive misting system to help root cuttings." But that slow, deliberate act struck Pam as something of a letdown compared with the thrill of hunting roses. "I tell you," she says, "it was a relief when Mike started up and I could just bring my little cuttings to him and let him do the propagating."

She joined the Heritage Rose Society, the biggest American organization for old-rose fanciers, as well as the more hybrid-tea-focused American Rose Society. It was at one of the A.R.S. meetings in Houston that she met Margaret Sharpe.

"Old roses are a tight world," Pam says. "Pretty soon, you know everyone. You may mention my name in Australia, and a rose person will know who I am."

Margaret Sharpe, however, was not just any rose person. "Some people are in it to make collections, but not me," she states. "Some people are looking for a particular type of a particular rose. My way is when I see a pretty rose that would look pretty in my yard, I start me a cup and grow it till I get tired of it."

Margaret has grown roses ever since 1944, the year she married and moved into her first home in Corpus Christi. Having four children did not stop her from the serious cultivation of hybrid teas. "I kept my kids out there in the yard with me," she recalls. "They learned enough gardening that by the time they were teenagers, they all did it for the neighbors, for money." The approach she taught them was anything but finicky.

"I believe in just taking my cup of coffee and my clippers out to the garden in the morning and snip here and there," she says. "Do what you want. That way, there's never this awful feeling that the fourteenth of February is Valentine's Day and your roses must be fed promptly on Valentine's Day. People's lives are regimented




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John Everett / Chronicle

When she moved to Houston, Margaret Sharpe turned from judging rose shows to trying to find antique roses for historic government buildings.

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## ROSES

Continued from Page 11

enough without all that."

She did well with her Zen approach. By the time the Sharpes moved to Houston in 1977, Margaret had won "about every award there is" and been appointed a life consulting rosarian by the American Rose Society. This title "means they think I'm doing all right," Margaret says, and it allows her to judge any A.R.S. show in the country, any time she feels like it. But by the time of the move to Houston, she says, she didn't much feel like it.

"I quickly found out that Houston has the largest rose society in the world," she recalls. "They had quite a few consulting rosarians already." The idea of being one of the crowd did not appeal to Margaret. "I said, 'Where do I fit into all this?'" The society decided she could be trusted to find a few antique roses to grace Houston's historic government buildings.

Obligingly, Margaret struck out into that new territory. With the sesquicentennial anniversary of the Republic of Texas coming up, she decided she'd try to find out which roses were popular during the Republican period and which, if any, were still blooming 150 years later. Once out on the road, she immediately began to take cuttings.

"You have to — it's only normal," she says. "It's no different than taking the smell from a rose. Then you take a paper cup and some clean soil and stick it. There's no trick to it. Just keep aware."

Like Pam Puryear and Mike Shoup, Margaret Sharpe was captivated by the ability of old roses to thrive through adversity and neglect. Because she and Pam were seeking essentially the same thing, they became rose-hunting companions.

"We were all over the countryside," Pam remembers of those early days. "We haunted the old cemeteries, where the roses had been surviving for eons, and we gave ourselves a nice, highfalutin' name."

Even though they were now the Brazos Symposium on Old Roses, their mission was firmly rooted in the earth. They couldn't have tracked down their roses, for instance, without blending into the tapestry of gossip they found in every small town. They both came around so often, displaying so much patience and fascination, that people usually told them whatever they wanted to know.

"I particularly remember a tiny German bakery over by Highway Ten," Margaret says. "There was just one old rose in the whole town, and it was the prettiest purple — a gorgeous thing that had really struggled. We went back there two, three times trying to discover what it was. And finally — on the strength of repeat visits — we learned that the old bakery was one house out of several that had once belonged to four sisters, who had homes on the remains of their family land. Long about 1910, all four had hundreds of those purple roses. This was the only one that survived."

No one ever figured out the real name of that purple rose — but the little they knew was enough for Margaret Sharpe, who grew a cutting in her yard and called it Corner Bakery Rose.

"It was the two of us and anyone else we could drag up," Margaret recalls. "We'd find roses growing away down in the middle of nowhere, cows eating them down, and they just kept

growing. We were very taken with that."

"We'd go to these little old towns and cruise the streets in September or October, looking for roses that were still flush," Pam remembers. "Then we'd go back in November when it was cool, with an ice chest. You can't root a rose too well until the weather cools off."

Into the waiting mason jars went cuttings of roses that later turned out to be two-thousand-year-old Gallica strains. In went the Little Food Market Rose, later identified by Pam as a very refined polyantha rose from 1890 called Clotilde Soupert. In went the Hole Rose — "We found it growing in a hole," Margaret explains — along with Emma West and Emma East, cut from the east and west sides of a house belonging to a woman named Emma.

Like Mike, they had their best luck in towns and cemeteries on the wrong side of the tracks. "Rich people's graves have the hybrid teas from the garden center," Margaret explains. "Poor and ethnic people, they don't give a damn what the American Rose Society recommends. In the Mexican sections, Old Blush is all over, all wound up among the graves. You have to hope the care isn't very good. Otherwise, the city hires these butchers who hack the roses down."

On babies' tiny graves, they found old roses cultivated for their tiny flowers. They found the Memorial Rose, a white "running" rose — a climber, in other words, with nothing to climb up. (Along the way, both decided the time they were spending as live inhabitants of cemeteries was enough. Neither wishes to be buried in a graveyard, with or without a rose. "I'd rather be cremated and end up as fertilizer," Margaret says.)

By the second year of hunting, both women had a surplus of rooted plants, which they began trading with a like-minded "bunch from Dallas."

"Everyone would meet up at my house and we'd all bring Ziploc bags full of cuttings and rooted plants and we'd swap," Pam says. "After that, we'd start rustling in a caravan."

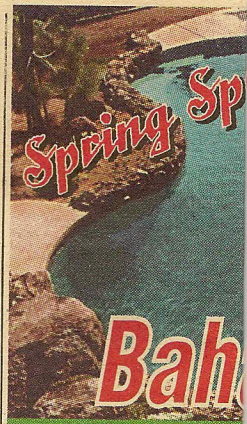
They were welcome almost everywhere they went.

"We'd get permission, of course," Margaret says. "Once, we were walking through a field and a neighbor farmer caught sight of us. He wanted to know what we thought we were doing. 'Looking for roses,' I said. He says, 'A likely story, and I suggest you just get right off this property,' and he brandished a shotgun! Well, we didn't argue with that, but afterwards we laughed and laughed."

Margaret's friends, who heard the story over and over again, wanted to know if she really intended to subject herself to such dangers. "Well," she remembers saying, in her finest gunfighter drawl, "I still like roses. I think I might just go rustle up a few."

That's how the Brazos Symposium turned into the Texas Rose Rustlers, whose logo features an armadillo-riding cowboy wielding clippers. The whole concept was a breath of fresh air in rarefied rose circles, and rose rustling took off. Today, there are 225 registered rose rustlers in Texas, all of whom pay seven dollars per year for the Old Texas Rose newsletter and directions to the latest rose-gathering ground. "But thousands more show up to the rustles," Margaret adds. "We're not very official. We just take people in — we don't even care if we have your money or not." Soon, the idea of a quiet rustle among friends was all but extinct.

"By 1984, we'd have eighty cars at a time show



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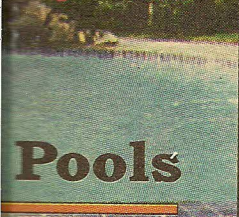
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Remodel

up for rustles," Pam says. "Once we lost half of 'em at a stoplight and never did find them."

"It's been an adventure," Margaret agrees, "quite a shocking adventure. Out in the country, people see all these cars coming and they think it's a funeral. The little children run around, whispering, 'Who died?' and wondering who we are. Well, we're all different kinds, some black, some white, some Hispanic, some in their teens, and some in their eighties and nineties, and we all get out and go around together. We're immediately friends," she says. "We immediately have common ground."

A few months after my trip to the Antique Rose Emporium, I passed through Anderson, Texas, on my way to western Louisiana. Pam Puryear was there, scaring tourists as promised, and a few locals as well. On the way to lunch, she led me right under the nose of a moving school bus, which set up a terrible honking and caused her to search for a hankie.

"This is, of course, the noon rush," she said, guiding me through the nearly deserted, and very old, streets of Anderson. We came to a roadside cafe, where we ate chicken-fried steak - "If it's bad for you, give it here," Pam said - and talked about gardening at a breathless clip. Pam told me her favorite gardening outfit consists of "this old blue calico dress, real long so I can bend over with impunity, but it done got so thin you can read a newspaper through it."

After lunch, we went to a graveyard where Old Blush has been known to bloom, but it was too late in the year. No matter. Pam was able to indulge a brand-new obsession - the rescue of plastic flowers from cemetery Dumpsters. "I'm a ghoul," she said cheerfully, "which, if you think about it, ranks pretty low in the social structure. What I do with these flowers is I make awful hats, covered with dripping greenery, to wear to

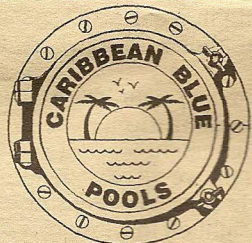
garden club meetings. If you give me five dollars for the hat and the tulle, I'll make you one. It'll be horrible," she promised.

While I wait for the hat to arrive by UPS; and for the Texas Rose Rustlers' annual Pearl Harbor Day rustle; and for the next fascinating cemetery to come along; and for Dear Pa to either root or die, I've been thinking about old roses, wondering what it is about them that keeps me - and so many others - interested. There's no denying that they are somehow a cut above other flowers. I have practically no memory, for instance, of the smell of the florist roses that sat on my desk all last week. And yet twenty-eight years ago, when I was seven, I ran across a white rosebush in an abandoned lot, growing through the remains of an old boathouse, and its fragrance still tantalizes me. What was that unroselike smell - maple syrup?

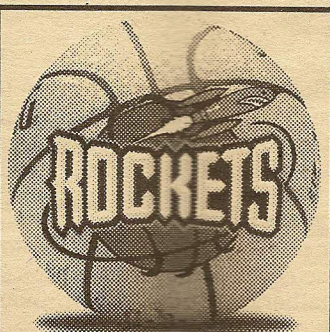
Identifying that smell - and that rose - strikes me as an eminently worthwhile pursuit. I think this is because being around old roses is good for me. Old roses, by example, are full of instructions on how to live right. They stand for certain things I like to consider true. Such as:

1. There is more than one way to be beautiful.
2. Survival is a noble goal.
3. Good climates are in the eye of the beholder, not the tourism board.
4. If you are attacked by disease, abandonment, or a bad chain of events, do not necessarily despair. There is always the chance you were bred to be tough.
5. Everyone should not smell the same. 🇺🇸

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