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TEXAS ROSE RUSTLERS

Plant hunters working to save heirloom varieties

By Molly Glentzer

The way Greg Grant remembers it, Mrs. Operstény was cranky the day he and Bill Welch came calling.

It was the mid-1980s — the heyday of the intrepid plant hunting group the Texas Rose Rustlers — and they wanted to take cuttings of the elderly woman's "Maréchal Niel" rose.

"If I give it to you, I'll have to give it to everybody," Mrs. Operstény said.

Welch, the Texas A&M University horticulture professor who co-founded the Rustlers and the Antique Rose Emporium, knew "Maréchal Niel" was historically important. Named for Napoleon III's minister of war, the rose was introduced in 1864 as one of the first deep-yellow, repeat-blooming climbers.

"Maréchal Niel" grew well enough in greenhouses to be sold as a cut flower in the late 1800s. But outdoors, it was persnickety, prone to mildew. And it pouted if pruned incorrectly. It was the kind of rose that gave roses a bad name.

By the time Welch and Grant spotted the one growing on a homemade trellis in Mrs. Operstény's yard in Bryan, you couldn't buy "Maréchal Niel" anymore: Only one nursery in California had a mother plant, and it was suffering from a virus.

Welch couldn't let a good specimen go.

Most of the old-time gardeners the Rustlers met were delighted to share cuttings of roses they inherited from their mothers and grandmothers. But Welch had to negotiate a deal with Mrs. Operstény: He'd pay for each cutting they took.

Good thing he worked out a deal because while he was on the front porch, Grant had already cut multiple stems, thinking he had permission.

The Rustlers, in spite of their renegade-sounding name, had a code of honor: They never snipped stems without permission, and they didn't decimate or remove the original plants.

Grant laughs as he remembers the "Maréchal Niel" incident —and the many characters he and Welch encountered. Their next book will tell the inside story of the Rustlers, who helped rediscover dozens of heirloom varieties during their forays into small Texas towns, old cemeteries and fields from the 1980s into the 2000s.

Next weekend, Welch and Grant will share some of their best stories in separate talks during the Emporium's 26th annual Fall Festival of Roses, at 11:15 a.m. and 3:30 p.m. respectively.

Their take is "super personal," Grant said. "We know when each of those plants that are now popular were found and where."

And he's seen their resilience.

During his first job as an extension agent in San Antonio, Grant staged a contest to find the oldest rose in town. The winner was a "Mrs. Dudley Cross" specimen whose owner could document its 101-year history.

"Everybody in San Antonio had 'Mrs. Dudley Cross,' " he said. "They were 6 feet tall and 6 feet wide, unpruned — spectacular things." He recalls one plant blooming even more beautifully than the rest. He asked the gardener what she had done to achieve such a display. Nothing, as it turned out: House painters had recently taken a chain saw to the thing and chopped it to the ground.

"That's when I knew, these are the kind of roses everybody should be growing," he said.

Roses are just a part of Grant's own story.

One of the state's most esteemed plant developers and garden writers, he has introduced many popular perennials to home gardeners — mostly improved varieties of native plants he calls "nativars." Among them are "Blue Princess" and "Pinwheel Princess" verbenas, "Gold Star" esperanza, "Laura Bush" and "VIP" petunias, "John Fanick" phlox, "Stars and Stripes" pentas, "Pam's Pink" honeysuckle, "LeCompte" and "Salinas" pink vitex, "Henry" and "Augusta Deulberg" sages, "Big Momma" and "Pam Puryear" Turk's cap, "Mary Helen Fredel" crossvine, and the "Marie Daly" and "Nacogdoches" roses.

"I was just born to find oddball plants," he said.

Although he was born in Tyler, a center for hybrid teas, Grant hated roses until he met Welch as a graduate student at Texas A&M.

"He showed me all these things I didn't know were roses," he said. "I went home and found an heirloom in my great-grandmother's garden. We didn't know what it was, so I called it "Big Momma's Blush"... I still grow it."

The Rustlers still produce a newsletter, but antique roses have been overshadowed in recent years by modern varieties that imitate them. Some of the newer roses boast even stronger disease resistance, plus lush flowers and fragrance. And they often have brighter colors than the antiques — the same trait that made "Maréchal Niel" so appealing in the 1800s.

Grant still forages for heirlooms.

Saving them is more important than ever, he said, as old houses are demolished, older gardeners die and cemeteries transition to blasé, "perpetual care" landscaping.

"It's all going to be lost if we don't round them up — not just roses, but bulbs and other heirloom plants," he said.

Mike Shoup, the Emporium's co-founder and longtime owner, is naturally keen on old roses, too. But he likes some of the new cultivars so much it scares him. He's introduced plenty of his own, crossing old varieties, under his Pioneer Series label. One of the latest is a gorgeous new take on the super-dependable "Belinda's Dream," called "Belinda's Blush."

Shoup has always loved "Maréchal Niel," but he hasn't stocked it recently.

“Never could grow that rose on its own roots,” he said.

Then he remembered that Florida plants-man Malcolm Manners successfully propagated “Maréchal Niel” by grafting it onto the species plant R. Fortuniana. Those specimens “are very vigorous and worthwhile,” he said.

He’ll be ordering some soon.

“The color, size and habit make it so romantic in the garden. It’s no wonder all the old books swoon about that one, even though it had to be pampered.”

Editor’s note: Molly Glentzer will be speaking at the Fall Festival of Roses at 10 a.m. Nov. 5.
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Courtesy photo

Right: Horticulturalist Greg Grant, one of the early Texas Rose Rustlers, is among the speakers at the 26th annual Fall Festival of Roses at the Antique Rose Emporium. Bottom: The Antique Rose Emporium features 8 acres of themed display gardens.

Fall Festival of Roses

When: 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Friday and Nov. 5, 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Nov. 6

Where: Antique Rose Emporium, 10,000 FM 50, Independence

Info: Free; 979-836-5548, antiqueroseemporium.com



Antique Rose Emporium

“Maréchal Niel” was a find for Bill Welch and Greg Grant during the early days of the Texas Rose Rustlers.