

Where Baby Roses Come From

by Pam Puryear

The recent furor over "cloning" has old rosarians bored: we've been doing it for years! Called vegetative reproduction, by snipping off bits to form a new plant, one gets an exact duplicate. But creating something new in rosedom means sexual reproduction, viz., raising a rose from SEED.

This simple process needs no equipment or arcane knowledge. Nor is it true (as I may have previously intimated) that one must be pure in heart. But like rooting own-root roses, everyone has different methods and stoutly defends their own - but what are meetings for but to argue about these things? And red Chinas. And yellow Teas. And so on...

Germination of rose seed hangs upon the DREADED DOUBLE DORMANCY. The Good Lord, in His wisdom to prevent all the little seedlings from coming up at once and getting zapped by something, decreed that two cold spells would be needed for rose seed to germinate. This the grower must overcome. Thank goodness for freon!

The first rule in raising your own rose - or your own human baby for that matter! - is pick the mommy/papa. In roses, the mommy needs to be (1) ever blooming and (2) a good setter of fruit. The best seem to be Hybrid Perpetuals, Bourbons and suchlike. However, just about everything in the rose kingdom is in these classes, so there is literally no telling what will come out! Theoretically, I believe there are four forms: a very low spray form, a standard shrub, a climber, and a miniature. A rose recently bred will often "sport" a climbing form soon after, sort of as if its chromosomes were "settling in", after which the chances of other sports/mutations drops. (This is an odd phenomenon, and I wish some learned genetics savant would explain it to me in words of one syllable, if possible.)

This April during rosetide, pick your parents. It is best the seed parent be in full sun - which it probably is anyway. E.B. LeGrice recommends pulling off the petals and sepals so they do not rot with botrytis. Dust the pollen onto the hep of your seed parent. LeGrice recommended covering the hep with say, a toe cut out of ruined pantyhose to protect from other pollen. He also dusted a few days later with Captan. Avoid watering from above. Also, label your cross.

As Edward G. Robinson proved (he played Mendel in the movie!), one quarter of the babies will be like the mommy, one quarter like the daddy, and the rest will mix everything in the whole line. This is where the fun and surprise come in.

Wild roses have a chromosome count of 7. The resulting progeny will have 14. But if a species (7) is crossed with a species hybrid (14), the result is a perfectly fine rose (21) but it will be a mule, and be incapable of further breeding. 'Mermaid' is a "miracle baby" because one parent R. bracteata was a mule and shouldn't have produced a fertile seed.

There is also spontaneous addition of chromosomes in some crosses. occasionally this will happen and the resulting plant is bigger, better, and healthier. 'Souvenir de la Malmaison' is a spontaneous tetraploid, and those of you who have grown it know why it is often the only Bourbon surviving without care in Texas!

In early Fall, the hips of your crosses will swell and begin to turn yellow and red. Store these in freezer bags for six weeks at 34 degrees F - in the crisper of the fridge. Remove for 6 weeks and keep at 70 degrees F, then return to the icebox at 40 degrees F. Remove from the pods at this time and store in dampish paper towels. Any seeds that float are not fertile and should be discarded.

Plant like any other seed in March and wait -patiently! Germination is always irregular. But just think, you have raised an entirely new rose and you can pass the time considering who in your life deserves having a new rose named for them!

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