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Rose rustlers seek out, restore, reintroduce long-forgotten blooms

By: Dean Fosdick, The Associated Press (Permission for use on the TRR Website by author on 8/16/2010)

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Mike Shoup is a self-described "rose rustler," but that doesn't make him an outlaw.

He rides herd on the many old garden roses growing wild in the countryside, corralling stray and neglected blooms to display in new settings.

"Generally when you think of a rose rustler, you conjure up an image of a Texan wearing a black outfit, astride a black horse and with a shovel on his shoulder pillaging roses from out-of-the-way places," said Shoup, owner of the Antique Rose Emporium in Brenham, Texas. "But it's just the opposite. What we try to do is find the kinds of roses that make gardening easy."

Shoup has built a thriving business from the heritage roses he's discovered, restored and then reintroduced to modern-day gardeners.

"We find them in neglected cemeteries, abandoned farmsteads, along fence lines, roadsides and other spots where they've survived for years without any care," Shoup said. "Cemeteries are the most fruitful hunting grounds. Families would often plant a favourite rose to honour their loved ones." Old garden, heritage and antique roses are interchangeable terms, but generally describe varieties introduced into commerce before 1867.

"People are collecting the heirlooms again because they have classic shapes," said Greg Stack, an extension horticulturist with the University of Illinois. "They have a loose, open form that blends well with other perennials or in mixed borders. Grandifloras or hybrid tea roses tend to grow taller and don't seem to fit in."

Shoup calls heirloom roses "beautiful, long-blooming and resilient, making them the perfect modern-day garden plant." "There's a great diversity," he said. "Every (old) rose has its own personality in the way it grows or blooms. They've been able to tolerate blizzards, drought and the toughest conditions Texas has to offer. They're the best of the best, and trouble-free for homeowners to grow."

And then there's their perfume.

"Unlike modern varieties, most old roses come with a fragrance that's as important as their appearance," Shoup said. "Once you smell that rose, you'll always have its scent in your memory." Rose rustlers from around the country operate under a gatherer's code of ethics.

"There's a protocol," said Faith Bickley, chairwoman of the Texas Rose Rustlers, a volunteer search and rescue group specializing in old roses. "We always ask first. We try to find out where they originally came from. If they're in an abandoned site or cemetery, we only take cuttings, so we don't hurt the original plants. We clean them up, weed and prune. We try to leave them better than they were when we found them."

Cuttings may take longer to develop than, say, placing bare-root bushes into the ground, but that practice leaves the parent plants intact while producing progeny.

There are many ways to take plant cuttings, but here is Shoup's favourite method:

"With the leaves still on, roll them (clipped stems) up in wet paper towels. Tuck them into zip-lock bags and store in a cool place until you can get them home. Fill a gallon-size zip-lock bag with moist potting soil, stick three or four cuttings into that material and close it up. Set it on an east-facing windowsill, and you should see new growth within a week or so."

Many antique roses are so old — in many cases dating to the 1850s — that their original names have been forgotten. If Shoup can't trace their lineage through historical accounts or information gathered from property owners, then he might classify them according to where they were found, such as "Highway 290 Pink Buttons," or "Martha Gonzalez" for the person who shared the cutting.

Online:

For more about antique roses, see the University of Arkansas Extension

website:<http://www.arhomeandgarden.org/landscaping/Shrubs/antiqueroses.htm>