

# Knowing and Growing Old Roses

by Nicole Juday Rhoads

**T**HE OLDEST EXTANT ARTISTIC DEPICTION OF THE ROSE IS A FRESCO FROM KNOSSOS, Greece, dating to 1500 BC. The blossom itself is unfamiliar to the modern eye—a single, five-petaled, pink disc flower, but the familiar compound leaves make the plant identifiable.

The fresco captures a moment in the history of the rose, after humans had fallen under the spell of this plant but before we had manipulated it through breeding and selection into a quite different thing from what nature had designed. Understanding the rose—what it wants to be compared to what we have demanded of it—is helpful in approaching how to grow, care for, and enjoy this plant, undoubtedly one of the most beloved ornamentals throughout human history.

My first forays into growing roses took place as a beginner gardener. Seduced by the gargantuan blossoms and vivid colorations of hybrid tea roses at a nursery, I bought several, which within months had their leaves turn yellow, then black before dropping, leaving a naked plant still struggling to produce a huge blossom or two.

A few years later and after my passion for gardening became the catalyst for a career change, I began a job as the gardener at the oldest rose garden in America. The garden at Wyck, in the Germantown section of Philadelphia, contained hundreds of roses, including some varieties that were unidentifiable, their original names having been lost to history. The various roses in this garden had been growing there for between 80 to possibly 250 years, in boxwood-lined parterres that, like all old gardens, had at times been carefully cultivated and



Roses—House of Livia mural, Rome, ca. 30-20 BC

at other times neglected or abandoned for decades. How had these roses survived? And why did they look so different from the roses I was familiar with from the nurseries or received on Valentine's Day?



Pink and white, old-style rose bloom

In the many ensuing years, I have continued to study and experiment and have arrived at a program that fills my home garden with healthy and beautiful roses that are long lived and require

no use of chemicals. Some varieties will want pruning, and, being heavy feeders, all appreciate monthly applications of dehydrated chicken manure from April to August.

Very few of the roses in my garden are modern introductions, and none are hybrid teas. This type of rose was developed as the availability and effectiveness of chemical controls was advancing (but before we understood their

environmental and health risks). The number of these cultivars increased with the popularity of indoor rose shows in the later 1800s, where cut flowers were exhibited individually in vases. In a short period of time, roses became valued not for their place in a beautiful border, but for exhibition-quality blooms. The plants themselves were not judged on their vigor or attractiveness, but for their upright habit with large flowers held singly on long stems—the rose we find today in a Valentine's Day bouquet.

Seeking out older cultivars meant for the garden is worth the hunt and expense of mail order. These plants were bred and propagated for their vigor and ability to grow in typical outdoor conditions. They also exceed the charm of modern roses with their distinctive individuality and often a wonderful perfume. The oldest garden roses are European, in the Alba, Damask, Gallica, and Centifolia classes, and probably originated in the Caucasus region before spreading west during the Crusades, naturally hybridizing with other varieties along the way. Although they bloom only

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once a year, it can't be held against them. For ten days, they are covered with gorgeous flowers in a range of pink hues that are strongly perfumed and ideal for making into jelly, potpourri, and rose-liqueur. Once the blooms are finished, these leathery-leaved, dark green shrubs are quiet until the following spring, requiring little pruning and no other attention.



*Rosa 'Celsiana'*



*Rosa mundi*



*Rosa 'Louis Philippe'*



*Rosa 'Comtessa du Cayla', flower and plant form*

### **Damask Roses**

The damask rose 'Celsiana' is always my favorite—a tall shrub with blooms of clear blush pink and a yellow boss. It was documented in Philadelphia as early as 1750 and is sometimes still seen in the oldest gardens. The low-growing, semi-double crimson Apothecary Rose and its striped sport (or natural mutation) *Rosa mundi* are also among the easiest and most rewarding varieties for the modern garden.

### **Hybrid China Shrub Roses**

For repeat blooming roses, I love hybrid china shrub roses. Their habit is more wispy and graceful than our stiff-caned modern roses, and their delicate flowers nod on bending stems. Although the plant appears dainty, these shrubs are reliable in zone 7 (but not always in 6) and bloom in flushes throughout the season, most heavily in spring and fall. Favorites are 'Comtesse du Cayla', a larger apricot flushed with deep blush, and 'Louis Philippe', a heavily double deep pink, edged with white. The downside to hybrid china roses is a complete lack of fragrance, a trait passed down from their Chinese ancestors.

### **Noisette Roses**

The Noisettes are sturdily upright, delicately leaved shrubs with repeat blooming sprays of smaller, double pastel flowers. Although introduced in the early 1800s, they somewhat resemble modern shrub roses, except that they are much more fragrant. Both 'Blush Noisette' and 'Champneys Pink Cluster' are standouts, and quite similar in appearance

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*Rosa 'Champneys Pink Cluster' (China hybrid)*

and vigor. The smell of noisette roses on the heavy air as cicadas chirp in the late afternoon sun is the harbinger of the end of summer.

Other repeat-blooming roses that succeed in the typical Southeastern Pennsylvania garden include 'Stanwell Perpetual', with ferny foliage and very double blossoms the color of heavy cream, and the similarly colored climbing rose 'Sombrieul'. The gorgeous 'Gruss an Aachen', opening salmon before fading to buff, is considered the first Floribunda rose, having been introduced in 1909.

### So Many Roses

It is thought that today there are over 15,000 different roses available commercially somewhere or other. It's hard to see that the world needs this many varieties of anything, and easy to imagine that many of these, particularly roses that are sickly or finicky to grow, will over time disappear. Besides their beguiling charm, my favorite thing about old roses is their Darwinian ability to have survived and even thrived, compared to many more recent introductions that have come and gone. Although not likely to be found on a nursery shelf, these pieces of living history are worth seeking out.



*Rosa 'Blush Noisette'*

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*Rosa 'Stanwell Perpetual'*

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*Rosa 'Gruss an Aachen'*

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Ed Note: All pictures provided by Nicole Juday Rhoads, unless specified otherwise.