

2009 AWARD OF MERIT WINNER

Old Roses In California

By Gary Scales

Anne Ross became a widow in 1862. She was just 40 and heir to nearly 9,000 acres of prime Marin County land. Within a handful of years, most of the property had been sold to pay off debt and support her family. Anne moved her family to a smaller house and planted dozens of climbing roses that by the 1880's "completely embowered" the home. The rose bushes are long gone, but the house has survived, still known as "Rose Cottage" and the oldest home in Ross.

Roses have long been part of California's history. The native Indian tribes were familiar with '*Rosa californica*', the wild species rose, with 1 to 2 inch pink, five-petaled flowers, found throughout much of California. The blossoms are fragrant and usually appear in large clusters. The half-inch hips were edible and also of good quality for tea. Most horticulturists consider California's species rose as "a modest one, not providing material or contributing to the array of popular hybrids" that fill most gardens today.



In the eighteenth century, the Franciscan friar Father Junipero Serra introduced California to the '*Rosa damascena*' he brought with him from Spain. Many believe it was the 'Rose of Castile', famous for perfume and soap, and a descendent of the 'Autumn Damask'. An *American Rose Magazine* article quotes a statement from General Guadalupe Vallejo recalling the California mission gardens as "...gay with roses, chiefly a pink and very fragrant sort...called by us the Castilian rose." These were planted at most of the missions and settlements Father Serra established along the coast in his attempts to Christianize the Indian population. There is evidence that a French scientific and goodwill expedition visited the Spanish colony of Monterey carrying an inventory of 'Rosier a' cent feuilles', or '*Rosa centifolia*' which were given as gifts to the military command and planted at the post. Some rose historians believe these were the first non-native roses to grow in California. Regardless of whether they were Spanish or French, surely all of the cultivars were eventually intermingled in the mission gardens along with cuttings from '*Rosa californica*', and those that survived have added to the legacy of old roses we enjoy today.

The discovery of gold in California brought dramatic social and economic changes. The enormous creation of wealth attracted worldwide attention and settlers poured into San Francisco and the Sierra gold fields. Goods and services expanded along with the population and nurseries that specialized in roses were in high demand.

From his classic, *The Old Rose Advisor*, Brent C. Dickerson reminds us of how in the Gold Rush

era, rose cuttings “crossed the plains, cherished and kept moist all the weary way, that the pioneer women might have a reminder of home in a new strange land. And how those pioneer roses cheered many lives which were full of loneliness and longing and often of deep disappointment ... spreading a mantle of beauty and fragrance over the forsaken ruins of solitary mining camps, ...flourishing in the warm rich soil of the Sierra foothills.”

Thomas Christopher tells a fascinating story in his book, *In Search of Lost Roses*, how in 1848, a dry-goods salesman and amateur horticulturist named A.P. Smith, joined with thirty other gold-seekers in buying a bark in New York and sailing it around Cape Horn to Sacramento. The men passed the voyage gambling their shares in the ship, and by the time it tied up in California, Smith was one of the major owners. He used his winnings to start a nursery and by 1856 published his first “Descriptive Catalogue offering an unusually fine stock of choice roses.” The roses were transported in pots by horse-drawn wagons across the continent, or carried around the treacherous Cape Horn by sailing ships. According to Christopher, Smith offered over 80 different varieties of hybrid perpetuals, bourbons, chinas, noisettes, teas, moss roses, and climbers from what reached a stock of 15,000 plants.

Two others who contributed to the stock of “Gold Rush” roses were Lloyd Warren and William Walker. Both businessmen were drawn from the East Coast in search of gold, but who established rose nurseries in Sacramento and San Francisco. Together they offered nearly 200 different types of roses, a figure that few Eastern nurseries could have matched in 1860.

William Collie, a Scotchman who previously had owned a nursery and florist shop in San Francisco, established the Marin County’s first nursery in Sausalito about 1870. Collie named the nursery “Rosebank,” for the cascades of rambling roses that tumbled down the hillside to the Bay. Although Collie moved the nursery to another location, the new owners, who built their family home on the property, retained the name and ‘Rosebank,’ endured for another three generations.

By the end of the nineteenth century the world was literally awash with different varieties of roses. Gardening became a fashionable pastime and roses were the centerpieces of most gardens. Improved methods of propagation, together with better transportation and communications gave garden lovers their choice of thousands of new roses. The tea and china roses were hybridized with existing stocks. French breeders had introduced the bourbons. In the United States, John Champneys and Philippe Noisette had perfected a remontant variety that became known as noisettes. And of course, the introduction of ‘La France’ in 1867 marked the first hybrid tea that also was a repeat bloomer. By the 1890’s, hybrid teas, floribundas and grandifloras were replacing the hybrid perpetuals and other recently commercially marketed varieties, including many of the old garden roses.

Most of the names and origins of these early roses faded into obscurity as quickly as they had gained initial popularity. In the 1930’s a shy, unassuming Englishman by the name of Francis Lester began a life-long mission to preserve California’s rose heritage. He founded a nursery dedicated to collecting and identifying old garden roses. His inspired successor was Will Tillotson, who together with Dorothy Stemler nourished and nurtured the love of old-fashioned, rare and unusual roses. The nursery became known as *Roses of Yesterday and Today*. Today their old catalogs are of collector-quality and a visit to the redwood-surrounded nursery on Brown’s Valley Road in Watsonville is a destination for all serious antique rose lovers.

Fortunately, others joined Francis Lester, Will Tillotson and Dorothy Stemper in these efforts not

to lose the old roses that had played such an important part of early California gardens. Miriam Wilkins had read the glowing descriptions of early gallicas, damasks, albas and centifolias in one of Will Tillotson's early catalogs and became obsessed with these roses. She founded the Heritage Roses Group, which conducts marvelous seminars on old roses as well as publishing an informative Rose Letter. Each May for over thirty years, the Heritage Roses Group sponsors a Celebration of Old Roses in El Cerrito where hundreds of old variety of roses are on display for everyone to enjoy. Miriam Wilkins's efforts led to the establishment in 1986 of the Heritage Rose Foundation, which was formed to preserve old garden roses and to disseminate education and information about their origins and history.

The Historic Rose Garden within the City of Sacramento Cemetery and the San Jose Heritage Rose Garden are both dedicated to the preservation of antique and old garden roses. The Sacramento Garden features those roses found in Gold Rush ghost towns and abandoned mining camps, homesteads, cemeteries and roadside throughout northern California.

Today the modern hybrid tea is the mainstay of most rose gardens. But yet, the old garden roses have provided the genetic diversity and varieties of colors, shapes and scents that we enjoy.