

Roses and History: a heady mix

The first thought that comes to mind when you consider the conjunction of roses and history may be the Wars of the Roses that dragged through thirty years of the 15th Century. The royal House of York (white rose) and the equally royal House of Lancaster (red rose) battled back and forth until Richard III was killed at Bosworth and the antagonists settled on the House of Tudor with Henry Tudor becoming Henry VII. The rest of that tale has become familiar through costume dramas and romance novels.

More important to rose growers is the 19th Century explosion of imported China roses to England and the Continent. When Napoleon discarded Empress Josephine in hope of an heir, she consoled herself by planting roses at Malmaison. An avid horticulturist, her interests were broad but eventually focused on roses. The species and varieties in her greenhouses and gardens were in large measure provided by Andre DuPont, an outstanding collector of the times. Although an employee of the postal service he also worked with the institution for the study of plants specializing in roses.

Roses were being imported to England from China through Calcutta where they rested from their voyage in the large garden set up by the British East India Company. The British had a monopoly on the Chinese plant importation, the French having been cut out when the rival French company parallel to the British East India Company went bankrupt during the French Revolution.

When Josephine heard that a rose that had become famous as ‘Hume’s’ Blush Tea-Scented China was en route from a nursery in Canton to Sir Abraham Hume’s garden in England, she managed a ‘détente’ between British and French admiralities so that a specimen could be sent to her. Even when Napoleon imposed a blockade on Great Britain, Josephine persuaded the Emperor to give an English nurseryman a permit so that he could cross the Channel and bring seeds and plants to Malmaison.

These sought-after roses were never confined to one garden: slips and seeds and plants found their way to gardens all over Europe and even to Russia. Love of plants and the passion for collecting them transcended the collapse of empires and the invasions of big and little wars.

Half of the 200 known rose species in the world are native to China and the Chinese had been cultivating them for more than 2000 years. When trade opened up in the second half of the 18th Century, roses were eagerly welcomed, although it is probable that there had been imported slips and seeds before that time by those intrepid travelers who penetrated to the Far East.

After 1750 European botanists discovered the China rose. Linnaeus catalogued a reflowering pink China, *R. indica*, after one of his students traveled to Canton and brought back a specimen in 1752. In the following years there was a frenzy of breeding that resulted in new colors and scents and, most important, in remontancy – the ability of a rose bush to reflower over several months. This important introduction led to the development of teas and hybrid perpetuals and eventually to the modern hybrid teas.

Postscript: “What about ‘real’ laurel?” a reader asked as I had mentioned two plants, English Laurel (*Prunus*) and Poet’s Laurel (*Danae*) that were really NOT laurel. Laurel, botanically *Laurus*, is a species of evergreen shrubs and trees from woodland, scrub, and rocky places. *Laurus azores*, Canary laurel is native to the Azores and Canary Islands and grows to thirty feet in zones 8 to 10. *L. nobilis*, from the Mediterranean region, is also called Bay Laurel (A name shared by our own *Magnolia virginiana* and *Persea borbonia*.) Both *Laurus* species are

valued for their slim, ovate glossy green leaves that grow to about four inches long. These leaves are the bay leaves used in cooking.

For years I had a *L. nobilis* planted outside and it grew to a well-shaped 15 inches but each winter it would die back to its roots. Eventually I dug it up and planted it into a 12-inch pot where it looked charming but didn't exactly flourish. After several years of toting it to and from the protection of the garage, I put the leaves into an empty spice bottle and pitched the plant. Those leaves have graced many a soup pot.

28Aug14