



## **A Story of Roses**

**Beryl Harris**

*Would love appoint some flower to reign?  
In matchless beauty on the plain,  
The Rose, mankind will all agree  
The Rose, the Queen of Flowers should be.  
Sappho, 600 B.C.*

Roses have had an honoured place in our hearts and gardens, since Adam and Eve. Well, for at least 2,000 years anyway. Even before roses were grown for their beauty, fragrance and medicinal value, they grew in the wild. I am sure that the cave men appreciated this lovely little flower. Can you imagine a caveman taking a bunch of “real” roses to his cavewoman? I am sure it worked so much better than a club.

By studying fossil remains, scientists have determined that roses have been with us for forty million years – give or take a few hundred years. Sappho the Greek poet of the sixth century B.C. is credited with calling the rose the “Queen of the Flowers”.

When you plant a rose in your garden you are welcoming not only a plant that will give you great pleasure with its beauty and fragrance, but you are also bringing a rich heritage of legend and history into your garden. The sacred flower of Aphrodite and Venus, its blossoms have graced ancient Babylonian and Persian gardens. A special flower to all the cultures who have known it. I understand that even the madman Hitler had a Rose Garden

In the 4<sup>th</sup> century B, C, the Greek botanist Theophrastus described various roses. Assyrian and Babylonian architectural details featured the rose motif, but the Romans were the first to use roses as a garden plant. For weddings, funerals, or ceremonies and celebrations, thousands of roses were part of their activities. Indeed the Roman’s frenzied admiration of the rose made it a symbol of extravagance and over indulgence. At one of Nero’s festivities, several guests “drowned” in a sea of rose petals, they were strewn so thickly, and perhaps the habit of drinking rose wine helped somewhat too!

When Rome fell, the rose fell too, for the early church did not favour it. This was perhaps because it was so closely identified with the excesses of the Romans. Cultivation practically ceased except for a few monastery gardens until the time of Charlemagne. Even after that, roses were used mainly for medicinal purposes. Not until the 1200's did roses become more widespread and appreciated. Ironically, the church adapted the rose as a religious symbol. The white rose becoming the symbol for the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary.

The rose also became the popular design motif for the heraldic banners of many English noblemen. In 1272 Edward the 1<sup>st</sup> used the rose design as his own emblem. Over a century and a half later, the conflict between the British House of York, taking the white rose as its symbol and the House of Lancaster, symbolized by the red rose, resulted in the war of the Roses (1455-1485). It is said that the red and white striped rose appeared after the cessation of the conflict named the 'York and Lancaster' of course

The China rose arrived in England and France from the Orient in 1789. In contrast to most roses the China rose bloomed over a period of many months (the first of the repeat blooming roses). Also from the Orient, the Tea rose is a close relative of the China rose. Both these roses are the sources of our wonderful present day hybrid teas. I only wish that I could grow them in my garden.

Roses reached a peak of popularity in courtly Europe with Empress Josephine's grand palace and garden. Having an endless supply of money and manpower, not to mention influence (after all she was the wife of Napoleon 1<sup>st</sup>), Josephine attempted to cultivate every known variety of rose. This greatly influenced the popularity of roses and encouraged the development of new varieties. The Malmaison collection included gallicas, damasks, centifolias, Chinas, tea, Noisette roses (small shrub climbers), and Bourbon roses. Also developed were Moss and rugosa roses, plus others that were not recorded at the time.

Roses occupy a prominent position in American history. American Indians were cultivating roses in the James River Valley when Captain John Smith established Jamestown in 1607. The pilgrims planted roses of their own in 1621. Trust the English to bring their plants with them. Roses have also been grown at the White House since President John Adams in what has become the famous "Rose Garden"

The Rose is truly the "Queen of the Flowers" demanding all the pampering, watering, feeding, spraying, mulching on and on that that befits a Queen – but oh what rewards it offers.

I hope that you enjoyed this tiny stroll through the history of the rose. Check your local libraries if you wish to learn more about this truly beautiful flower.

Previously published in the Peterborough Examiner.

