

History of roses

THE ROSE HAS CAPTURED humankind's imagination for thousands of years, and has taken a place of honour in gardens around the world. Roses were first cultivated in the garden in China, but their use was soon worldwide. The Roman and Greek cultures placed both religious, medical and mythical significance on what the poet Sappho called "the Queen of Flowers".

The Roman passion for roses knew no bounds; the scented blooms found their way into food, medicine, and perfume. The returning hero found himself showered with thousands of petals, and an ostentatious host would carpet his floors with them so the scent would rise with every footstep. The Romans even invented the greenhouse for the very purpose of growing roses. The rose slipped from favour with the fall of the empire, kept alive only in the monastery medic garden. It wasn't until the Crusades when returning knights brought back new species roses that the rose began its return to prominence in the gardens of Europe.

The fourteenth and fifteenth centuries saw the first work in hybridizing roses in the West (the Chinese had been at it for 2000 years already). Two hundred new strains of roses were developed between 1580 and 1710. Then in 1781 the Dutch East India Company brought back a China rose named 'Old Blush' and the race was on. Over the next decade the Dutch and British East India Companies brought back dozens of new China roses, leading to the development of Teas, Bourbons, and Portlands. These were crossed into the existing pool of species and Old Garden roses, leading to an explosion of both rose hybrids and interest in them.

Over the years even more rose types were concocted with each new cross providing the stepping stone for the next. Species roses from all over the world became available to the breeders and there were soon new crosses. But in 1867, the first Hybrid Tea rose was introduced starting the Modern Rose era. All roses after that point are known as Modern roses, all those from before are Old Garden roses.