

In Search of Lost Roses: In your back yard with Rose Bible and beverage

by James Delahanty

Last May the University of Chicago Press reprinted Thomas Christopher's 'In Search of Lost Roses.' Christopher's book is one of those seminal works that achieve an effect far beyond any contemplation at the time of publication. It chronicled the fortunes and practices of persons who searched for 'lost' roses—roses that had survived over the years in abandoned farmhouses, overgrown and weedy cemeteries and in sites untended, unwatered, and unfed. The book highlighted the adventure of the search and celebrated the passion for roses that sparked it. If the decades of the seventies and eighties in the twentieth century were the golden days of searching and finding roses of the 19th century across America, Christopher was its chronicler and promoter. Many an Old Garden Rose enthusiasm began as a result of reading his book; it sparked many a lifelong love affair with roses and the discovery of them in out of the way places.

Today the search for lost roses extends beyond the wonderful creations of the 19th century. At the Descanso International Rosarium the bed devoted to 'Vintage Hybrid Teas' (1867-1940) features a plaque describing them as the roses 'most in danger of extinction.' Even more contemporary roses can be placed on the 'lost' or endangered list by virtue of marketing needs, the exigencies of maintaining an operating and profitable nursery, or just the devotion to the 'now' that overlooks the need to remember tomorrow.

While the wanderlust and spirit of adventure that undergirds the search for lost roses of the nineteenth century still beat in the hearts of rosarians (if a little less vigorously than before), the loci have changed. Abandoned farmhouses seem to have become victims to developments and bulldozers, modern cemeteries make short work of those who would plant roses or anything else to interfere with the supremacy of easy care equipment, and sheer residential mobility tends to prevent the kind of long term plant development that would enable roses to acquire sufficient presence to last through long term neglect.

However, it is likely that the last frontier in rescuing roses of the 20th century may well be the private gardens of unsung individuals. In a recent article (see www.venturarose.org link to the January, 2003 newsletter Rose of the Month) the rediscovery of Ralph Moore's 1952 introduction 'Climbing Yellow Sweetheart' was described. The place of discovery was a modest home in Glendale which had been occupied by the same people for over forty-five years and before that by the original purchaser from the 1940's. Thus, it is possible to combine the adventure of the original Rose Rustlers by venturing into one's own backyard and/or those of your neighbors.

This possibility links up with the attempt to gather in one place the more than five hundred roses hybridized by Ralph Moore over his seventy year career. When the project began, it appeared that almost twenty per cent of the total were lost to commerce, the present and posterity. Examination of public gardens and commercial enterprises reduced the list to the current status of about 85 roses from the 'master of Miniatures.' Of the missing 85, thirteen are miniatures introduced in the decade of the 1950's, while four were introduced as late as the nineties.

Rediscovery of any of these roses would require the happy combination of an observant eye, a garden of sufficient age, and a long time resident. The age and residence factors are not capable of being manipulated to any great degree: there is or is not a garden with unidentified miniatures and the

residents have or have not shovel pruned with vicious regularity. The observant eye, however, is another matter.

Many of the missing Moore miniatures of the fifties were distinctive in that they were small, even for miniatures by modern standards, being no more than a foot in height. 'Cutie,' for example, grew only ten inches. A 1952 introduction, it had a pointed bud, flowers of clear pink with a white base and only 15 petals. The foliage was small and glossy. The outstanding feature, however, was that the pointed petals seemed to form a perfect star. One commentator in the 'Proof of the Pudding' section of the 1954 American Rose Annual argued that the rose should be in every miniature collection if only for its startling 'novelty value.' Other observers noted this characteristic over the next five years. While the rose apparently did not excite much admiration for its exhibition qualities, as a garden rose it seemed to bloom well in such disparate places as El Paso, Illinois and Northern New Jersey.

'Pink Joy,' a 1953 introduction, grew up to one foot in height. The flowers were a deep pink, double, with around 30 petals extending only one inch in diameter. Uncharacteristically for a miniature, there was a sweet violet fragrance. The 1966 American Rose Annual noted that the plant had good disease resistance, freely bloomed, and that the flower shaded to a 'slight salmon tint' as it opened. On the other hand, 'Lemon Drop' and 'Snowflakes,' both 1954 introductions, grew to only six inches maximum in height. What distinguished 'Lemon Drop,' aside from the light yellow color and plant size, was the presence of a great number of prickles; 'Snowflakes' grew half a foot high with white double flowers.

To indicate the fragility of the modern rose shelf life, you might consider that of the four missing Moore roses of the 1990's, two ('Billy Boy' and 'Tag-a-long') disappeared from commerce only five years ago and the other two ('Isles of Roses' and 'Pretty Penny') were still listed in the Combined Rose List up to the year 2000. The likelihood that these four roses are still growing in a private garden somewhere has to be considered high given the propinquity in time. 'Billy Boy,' (1990) has pointed buds leading to small medium red blooms with 15 to 18 petals in a cupped form, usually one bloom to a stem.

The prickles are unusual in that they are slender, straight and brownish in color. It is a low growing, bushy plant with medium green dense foliage. 'Tag-a-long' (1992) is a medium grower, with few prickles, and semi-double blooms with 6 to 14 petals about one and a half to nearly three inches across. What is most distinguishing, however, is the contrast of reddish lavender against white in the blooms.

'Isle of Roses' (1993) produces clusters of yellow blooms one and half inches to three inches across; it has few prickles on a plant that grows nearly two feet in height, clothed in medium green semi-glossy foliage. 'Pretty Penny' (1994) produces copper colored semi-double blooms of 6 to 14 petals one and a half to three inches across mostly singly, but occasionally in clusters. There are no prickles at all. Medium green matte foliage grows on a spreading but compact bush. (The 'spreading, compact' bush was taken directly from MR11; it adds to the intrigue of locating lost roses.)

For a complete list of the missing Moore roses, you can go to the Sequoia Nursery website and click on the link to the list (www.sequoianursery.biz) Armed with the rose bible of Modern Roses 11, the age of the garden, the length of the residence, you are ready to start rustling at home, or at least close enough for a quick retreat should the forces dedicated to sound thinking and rational decision making make their presence known. In honor of the old 'master of Miniatures,' the beverage of choice should be Dr. Pepper. If the forces arrayed against romance and adventure are particularly noisome, something stronger can be added.

Findings or sightings or inspired guesses should be reported to Lyn Griffith (RoseBlush1@aol.com) who is coordinating part of the search and discovery process.

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Notes:

- 1) Even as this was being written, 'Isle of Roses' was confirmed as present in the garden of Colonel Phil Ash of San Diego; it had been a 1994 San Diego convention rose. Three other rose 'finds' have reduced the number of lost roses to 80 or slightly more.
- 2) A list of the missing Moore roses organized by year can be found under 'Articles' at www.venturarose.org
- 3) A debt of gratitude is owed to Paul Barden and Lyn Griffith for assistance and encouragement in writing this essay; they are, of course, in no way responsible for any errors of fact or judgment.

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