

Jeri and Clay Jennings: Rose Preservationists and Historians

The names of Jeri and Clay Jennings have been synonymous with roses, particularly Old Roses, for decades. Increasingly this association has referred to their pursuit and preservation of “found” roses. How and why did they evolve from lovers and patrons of commercially available roses to seekers and preservers of old and unknown roses? The evolution didn’t happen overnight, but its seeds were planted many years ago.

Jeri is a native Californian and has lived in Southern California all of her life, eventually moving to Camarillo, where she and Clay currently live. She, like many rose lovers, developed her nascent love of roses following her grandmother around her much-loved rose garden. Clay was born in Mississippi; grew up in Memphis, Tennessee; came to California in his 20’s as an engineer with the U.S. Navy, and has remained ever since.

Jeri and Clay met at a dog show, another one of their passions, which they still pursue. (Their two Dalmatians always accompany them on their travels visiting family, friends, and “rose rustling.”) At the time they met, neither of them gardened, although Clay grew some “monstrous” Birds of Paradise, citrus trees, and two seedling avocados.

A chance request Jeri received many years ago changed her life. A woman in Hancock Park asked Jeri to find the “most highly rated roses” for her 1920 home. In the process of this search, Jeri “became intrigued with Old Roses, as graceful Shrubs, which bloom”—the apparent spark which ignited the interest in and pursuit of Old Garden Roses she has enjoyed ever since.

Jeri’s first attempts at growing Old Garden Roses herself were in 1987 when ‘Reine des Violettes’ (Hybrid Perpetual, 1860), ‘Rosa Mundi’ (Gallica, prior to 1581), and ‘Mme. Isaac Pereire’ (Bourbon, Cl., 1881), were planted in her garden, and within a year, Clay (who had considered roses “ugly plants with bare bottoms”) removed the Birds of Paradise from the garden and began building beds for more roses. Only ‘Reine des Violettes’ proved successful in their foggy, coastal Camarillo climate, where it grew for 20 years and was shared with the Stagecoach Inn Rose Garden. The less-than-perfect performance of the other two taught them their first lesson in Old Garden Roses: Despite their many attributes, not all Old Garden Roses are appropriate for every climate.

Jeri joined the ARS and her first local Rose Society in the late 1980’s, followed by a membership in the Santa Barbara Rose Society. After many years as very active and instrumental members of the Ventura County Rose Society, she and Clay followed their dream of pursuing their interest in Old Roses and formed the Gold Coast Heritage Rose Group, an affiliate of the Heritage Rose Groups in late 2001/early 2002. While members of the VCRS, Jeri designed the Stagecoach Inn Rose Garden with roses appropriate to the period of its operation in the late 1800’s and was active in its maintenance for many years. She and Clay still return for annual pruning demonstrations at the Stagecoach Inn.

Talking with Jeri about Old Garden Roses, it becomes immediately apparent that she’s “done her homework.” She has studied the history of California and the Southwest—the establishment of Missions in California, the Gold Rush and Westward movement of families from the East, old ranches which once flourished in the Southwest one hundred or more years ago, some of the nurseries that operated in these areas in the past 100 years or so, and even some of the individual family histories involved in found roses. In her research, she came across Thomas Christopher’s 1989 classic book [In Search of Lost Roses](#), which she credits as the impetus that sent her and Clay down the road of rose preservation. Joining the Heritage Rose Groups further developed their interest in collecting and preserving old roses.

Jeri and Clay have traveled across the United States in their motor home in pursuit of forgotten roses. They have discovered many beautiful roses in old cemeteries, long deserted and neglected gardens, open fields and along old roads. Their pursuit of identification and preservation of unknown roses also extends to many roses discovered by others. Closer to home, unknown and as yet unidentified old roses have been found in Rancho Camulos in Piru, and in the gardens of older homes in Santa Barbara. Although their sources and backgrounds may differ, these roses share several common traits: They are old, as yet unidentified, and are true survivors, living, in most cases, on nothing but seasonal rains. As Jeri points out, “...*the roses that have managed to live on their own, with scant water, for 150 years -- Those roses are able to tolerate drought, and are resistant, at least, to the worst local diseases. The ones that weren’t died. Survival of the fittest. Darwin would approve.*” Rescuing these roses before they disappear from the landscape remains their prime concern.

At home in their private garden in Camarillo they enjoy approximately 300 roses—mostly Teas, Chinas, and Noisettes, which perform the best of all of the Old Garden Rose varieties in their climate. They also grow a few modern and semi-modern Hybrid Teas and shrub roses which they treat like shrubs and only lightly prune. They stopped spraying their garden years ago and now concentrate on roses which thrive without chemical assistance. Their garden also boasts exuberant and lush Brugmansias, fuchsias, irises and Epiphyllums.

Jeri has been awarded the ARS Bronze Medal and is a prolific and accomplished writer (including Editor of the Heritage Rose Group Quarterly, the Gold Coast Rose quarterly, as well as a long list of informative and educational articles concerning many aspects of rose growing), a much-sought-after speaker, an active Consulting Rosarian, and an excellent teacher. Jeri and Clay are active members of the Heritage Rose Groups, Heritage Rose Foundation, American Rose Society, and the Santa Barbara Rose Society. Together she and Clay have won too many exhibiting awards and trophies to mention (most of them involving Old Garden Roses). Jeri also is very active in various online rose sites and "Cyber-CRs." In 2007, rose breeder Paul Barden introduced the 'Jeri Jennings' rose in her honor, a lovely golden yellow Hybrid Musk rose with strong musk fragrance with clusters of old-fashioned bloom form. Jeri and Clay were jointly awarded the Pacific Southwest District Outstanding CR Award for 2002.



"China from Adina"
a rose found in
Jeri and Clay's rose rustling activities