

# Rethinking the Reblooming

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**t**hirty years ago in the United States, just five representatives of the Perpetual Damask Class were available to rose lovers. These were the original *Rosa damascena bifera*, called THE AUTUMN DAMASK or ROSE OF CASTILE, and four of its derivatives: the form we call today “PICKERING FOUR SEASONS” or ROYAL FOUR SEASONS, ROSE DE RESCHT, JACQUES CARTIER, and ROSE DU ROI. These five were particularly desirable for those of us who garden in cooler climates. With their full blooms of legendary scent, their ability to put forth successive crops of flowers, and their tolerance of Zone 5 winters, the few Perpetual Damasks available were much in demand then and now.

The past three decades have seen heroic efforts to preserve and distribute old roses around the world, with a veritable flood of new information about these old favorites for us to process. In light of recent research it is time to rethink the origins and the details of the history of Damask roses. Doing so will show how long-held theories can change in less than a generation in the rose world. We will also see that when the facts come to light, these old roses are more fascinating than we ever imagined.

This article will focus on the ROSE OF CASTILE, the original type of the Perpetual Damask group. Current nursery stock of this survivor of the ancient world came to our gardens from the plantings at the Franciscan missions along



# Damasks

El Camino Real in California. No one has written more lovingly about this rose than Francis E. Lester in his 1942 book, *My Friend the Rose*:

“It grows to shrub proportions, six feet high or more, its arching branches gracefully spreading from the base. The stems are of a pale green color and plentifully adorned with large thorns of varying size ... of a soft plum-red shade.... The foliage is most attractive in its many contrasting shades of soft green, often with distinct blue tones, the young tips of a fresh pale green. The leaves are from four to seven inches long, well-spaced, composed of five to seven leaflets.... The flowers are borne on bristly stems, sometimes singly but more often in corymbs of three or more, and the buds, on stiff, erect stems have long, daintily feathered sepals.... The bloom is of the flat old-fashioned type and consists of some thirty petals and showy yellow-gold stamens ... it is of a distinctive satisfying, even pink shade with sometimes a lavender tint, a flush of ‘animated pink’ as one writer calls it.... The flower takes on a deeper richer pink in the fall season ... is divinely fragrant with the true rose fragrance, free from the exotic and heady aroma of our modern rose perfume; to me it is the perfect example of a fragrance with the power to create visions, that somehow seems to be the essence of all the romances of a thousand years.”

In *The Old Shrub Roses* by Graham Stuart Thomas, that primer for all of us growing heirloom roses a generation ago, Dr. C. C. Hurst attempted to explain Damask origins. The once-blooming kinds had resulted from crosses between *R. gallica* and the Middle Eastern *R. phoenicia*. Recurrent types also sprang from *R. gallica*, but this time with the Musk Rose, *R. moschata* as the other parent. Dr. Hurst's theory became dogma in rose circles on both sides





ABOVE AND ON PREVIOUS SPREAD: Autumn Damask. Photo by Phillip Robinson.  
LEFT: *R. moschata flore plena* by Rédouté.  
RIGHT: *R. gallica*. Photo by Ron Robertson.

of the Atlantic, although the skeptics among us puzzled over why Summer and Autumn Damasks looked so much alike and why none of the offspring seemed to resemble the Musk Rose at all, after we finally got the true Musk here in the United States in the early 1980s.

Dr. Hurst's theory about the Damasks basically remained unchallenged until an article by three Japanese geneticists appeared in 2000 in *Genes: an International Journal of Genes, Genomes, and Evolution*. Hikaru Iwata, Tsuneo Kato, and Susumu Ohno tested the DNA of a number of the oldest Damask clones and arrived at two iconoclastic conclusions. First, they demonstrated that Summer and Autumn Damasks have identical genetic profiles, which means that both groups have the same parents. Secondly, they discovered that the Damasks are an amalgam of three species, not two. The genes of *R. gallica* and *R. moschata* are there as Hurst had hypothesized, but then a surprise: *R. fedtschenkoana*, a member of the great Cinnamon Rose family, a wild species from Turkistan in Central Asia, was definitely a Damask parent. *Fedtschenkoana* is rare in collections in the United States. My first experience of it was in the late Rae Chambers' garden in State College, Pennsylvania in August 2001. The eight-foot thorny canes were well-clothed with grey foliage, sporting a number of single white flowers with many buds in evidence. Yes, *R. fedtschenkoana* is by nature recurrent like the Rugosas. Once one has seen this species, the connection with the Damasks is apparent. It is surprising that this information has not been more widely circulated among rosarians.

The trio from Japan maintains in their article that the genetic indicators present in the Damasks tell part of the story of how they originated. A Musk "mother" was fertilized by Gallica pollen. Then the resulting hybrid was crossed with *Fedtschenkoana*. This interesting scenario may have significant implications for our understanding of rose history. Consider the following:

1. The Japanese findings in 2000 have a direct bearing on the history of the mysterious Musk Rose. Most of us who grow the Musk cherish its Shakespearean connections, its associations with the great herbalists of the 1600s, its place in colonial American gardens, and the part it played in the breeding of the Noisettes. However, beside these credits, the Musk has a whole other identity in the Islamic world, enjoyed especially in Moorish Spain for its fragrance and late bloom. Its name in Arabic is *Nisri*, first recorded around 1000 A.D. Although the Musk Rose has escaped from gardens at various places in the Mediterranean basin and is noted as naturalized on the islands of Corfu and Crete, its native region has, up to now, been undetermined. Belgian scholar Ivan Louette has surveyed volumes of herbarium evidence in his search for the Musk's true home. In the collections of botanists Crepin and Aitchison, M. Louette has located pressed specimens collected across the Western Indus

Valley up into Afghanistan. While classified as *R. brunonii*, these finds are very close to our Musk and are documented from both wild and garden sources. If this information is being interpreted correctly, the *R. moshata* of horticulture is a shrubby recurrent mutant of a wild western variant of *R. brunonii*, grown for more than twenty-five hundred years for the qualities listed above and one additional attribute—its powers as a laxative!

2. When and where could a rose from the Indus Valley have met up with *R. gallica* in the ancient world to form the first step toward the Damasks we know? Dr. Hurst detailed one such hybrid in *R. sancta* (*R. richardii*). Most of us are familiar with the story of the Holy Rose's discovery in early Christian tombs in Egypt. While Hurst believed *R. sancta* to be Gallica × Phoenicia, the Japanese research rules out Phoenicia as a parent. The Musk should be tested now. From the late 7th century B.C. up until the time of Alexander the Great three hundred years later, Egypt, Asia Minor, and the entire territory of the Middle East were ruled by the same ancient superpower, the Persian Empire. The Persians also had strong commercial ties with the Indus Valley. Superior trade goods like amber, lapis lazuli, and ivory were easily disseminated to the farthest reaches of the Persian domain. Could it also have worked this way with superior varieties of plants? Ivan Louette provides an important footnote on the subject of the Holy Rose. He contends that the original *R. sancta* has disappeared from gardens and nurseries on both sides of the Atlantic, having been usurped by a form of *R. polliniana*. M. Louette has published photos of the herbarium specimens of the original *R. sancta* find and makes his case, unfortunately. We need the real Holy Rose back in our collections.

3. The final Damask issue we will consider in light of the Japanese findings concerns *R. fedtschenkoana*. Its home in Turkistan is a long way from the Indus Valley and from *R. gallica*'s home in Asia Minor. This unique, reblooming, hardy species apparently did not show up in



*Rosa fedtschenkoana*. Photo by Bernard Loubert.



Duchess of Portland. Photo by Phillip Robinson.

horticulture until collected from the wild little more than a century ago, as far as we know at present. British historian and author Michael Wood in his volume *Alexander the Great* records that in 494 B.C. the Greek cities of coastal Asia Minor attempted to revolt against their Persian overlords. When the Persians quelled the insurrection, a number of Asian Greeks were exiled to the far northeast provinces, a stone's throw from the native territory of *R. fedtschenkoana*. Among these exiles were a number of priests, the Branchidae, from Miletus. Miletus would later become famous for its twelve-petaled red roses. Did Milesian

rose lovers carry roots or suckers with them on their journey east? Could this sequence of events provide a clue as to how a Gallica–Musk hybrid met up with a Central Asian wild species to produce the Damask?

4. Some fifteen hundred years before the Crusaders would connect this variety of rose with their stay in Damascus and bring it back to Europe as a souvenir, a chance seedling of rare form and amazing fragrance opened its petals for the first time. Perhaps this happened in the flowerbed of Greek exiles, perhaps in the easternmost territory of the Persian superpower. This novelty had inherited from its two reblooming parents the ability to flower beyond the usual spring season. From the Gallica it had received its blush coloring and more than the normal number of petals. How long before its first admirers shared suckers with the outside world? How long before the Persian overlords made this new creation their very own? Maybe someday we will know. Michael Wood gives us a hint in quoting from the diary of Alexander's military conquests for the year 331 B.C. On October 24 or 25, "Alexander ... entered Babylon with horses and the accoutrements of war to be received by the citizens of Babylon" (which he had just conquered). The diary continues to relate that "the city elders had hastily organized a welcome, and the street was strewn with flowers and garlands; altars burned incense and oil on the sidewalks and wafted pleasant smells as the citizens showered Alexander with rose petals." This is October, please remember. As far as we know only two roses could have been in bloom that autumn day in Babylon: the skimpy-petaled Musk and the Damask. My money is on the Damask.

In conclusion, the long career of the Damask Rose begins, it seems, in Persia with this unique flower, which combines the best traits of three great rose tribes. In time it would find a prominent place in the Hellenistic world of Alexander, in the gardens of Asia Minor, and subsequently as the basis of a cut-flower industry in Egypt. Greek colonists would carry this same flower with them to their thriving settlements in Southern Italy, especially to Poseidonia, which one day would become Paestum, the home of poet Virgil's "twice-blooming rose gardens." Then as the Roman world crumbled, the forces of Islam would carry this Persian souvenir with them (along with sugar cane, rice, citrus, and jasmine) across Africa and up into their European conquests.

By 1492 Islam had left Spain, but the flower remained as the Rose of Alexandria. Soon it would be Spanish colonists who would carry the Damask to the New World as the Rose of Castile, as would the Franciscan *padres* as they established their missions. This ancient flower would then go on to have a new lease on life in European horticulture, giving rise to the Portland and the first Monthly Roses in the 1700s, and in the next century to the Bourbons, ultimately playing an important role in the Victorian era in the breeding of Hybrid Perpetuals and Perpetual Mosses.

If our western world is ever looking for a floral emblem that embodies the drift of history for the past twenty-five centuries, we need look no further. *Rosa damascena bifera* could well serve as a poster child for civilization itself.

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*The Rev. Douglas T. Seidel, a consultant to the Thomas Jefferson Center for Historic Plants at Monticello, Virginia, designed the planting plan for the Léonie Bell Noisette Garden on the Center's grounds. Doug joined the HRF Board in 2003. His collection of old roses features the early type of small-flowered Noisettes, hybrids of American natives, local forms of Gallicas and Portlands, and the very earliest Polyanthas and Minis. A Musk rose released by Vintage Gardens is named in his honor.*