

# Charting a New Path— *The Brownell Hybrid Teas*

Dan Russo

The first Hybrid Teas were bred in France and England during the later 19th century as crosses between the two most popular rose classes of their day—the Hybrid Perpetuals and Teas. By 1900 the HTs had established a reputation for such desired qualities as remontancy and fragrance. Their popularity grew in the early decades of the 20th century with a host of new varieties appearing that offered improved plant vigor and sturdier flowers. By the late 1920s, however, problems were becoming evident. On the one hand, popular demand had spawned a host of rather similar varieties, while repeated inbreeding had somewhat lessened the group's vigor as compared to earlier cultivars. Moreover, the one major innovative hybridizing program, that of Joseph Pernet-Ducher, had brought mixed results.

In an effort to expand the HT color range, Pernet-Ducher introduced the *Rosa foetida persiana* strain. This so-called Pernetiana group and its infusion into HT lines did indeed bring enriched colors and shapelier, stronger flowers, especially in the yellow/orange/salmon range, but it also increased blackspot susceptibility. As the 1930s approached, many home rose growers, especially in America, were becoming quite disheartened with HT performance. In particular, hybridizers seemed not to be addressing two serious HT issues: disease proclivity and winter tenderness. The time was ripe for change, and it came from the Brownell family of rose hybridizers, headed by Walter D. Brownell (1873–1957), in Little Compton, Rhode Island.

Walter D. Brownell had already been making his mark in the rose world in the early 1930s with his creation of healthy, hardy, Large-Flowered Climbers/Ramblers, notably in the yellow shades. In his breeding program (which also included an im-



Break o' Day. Photo by Phillip Robinson

portant group of procumbent “creepers”), Brownell built upon the work of Walter Van Fleet, who had crossed the species *R. wichurana* with early HTs to produce his cherished line of climbers. Concurrently with his climber and creeper program, Brownell turned his attention to improvement of HTs themselves. He had been speaking out, along with such luminaries as Horace McFarland and Robert Pyle, about the beautiful HTs of rose catalogues, which, when planted in the north, would invariably defoliate by midsummer and die over winter.<sup>1</sup>

Too much hybridizing effort, Brownell believed, had been directed to improving HT flower form rather than plant vigor. Thus he began an innovative breeding program that he hoped would increase HT desirability by improving hardiness and overall plant strength. Brownell concluded that what was needed, in effect, was the infusion of an outside gene pool whose plants were known for their healthy, lustrous foliage and sound winter-hardiness, namely *R. wichurana*. His ultimate goal was a new race of reliable garden HTs with freedom from blackspot, winter-hardiness to  $-15^{\circ}\text{F}$ , long plant life, and cumulative growth in both plant and bloom size. As a firm believer in scientific hybridization along the lines of Mendel, Brownell knew the task would not be easy. The desired qualities would have to be obtained over several generations of seedlings, but the path was taken.

After several years of experimentation, Brownell produced a promising group of seedlings that he called his “early Hybrid Tea breeders.” The *wichurana* component came not by way of the species but rather through the Van Fleet Climbers, in particular, MARY WALLACE, GLENN DALE, and DR. W. VAN FLEET. Unfortunately, the HT parentages are not recorded, though as noted above, the Van Fleets themselves had strong HT ancestry. The Brownell introductions may thus best be termed “Hybrid Tea-Hybrids.” One can reasonably suggest that the unusually tall growth of many Brownell HTs, along with their tendency to bloom in clusters, occasional seven leaflets, and notable disease resistance, are all features derived from their *wichurana* inheritance. When grown as the Brownells instructed in their catalogues, i.e., grafted on *multiflora* rootstock with the bud union placed several inches deep, they have indeed proven to be very long-lived, floriferous roses. Their flowers have special appeal for lovers of old garden roses. Many have soft, mingled shades, as had the early HTs, while flower forms range from very double, even quartered, to sharply reflexed, to large, open, and semi-double. Moreover, fragrance in HTs did matter to Walter Brownell. Most are very well scented, with an alluring blend of spicy Tea and fruity *wichurana* aromas.

Among the early Brownell HTs, several deserve special mention: BREAK O’ DAY,

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<sup>1</sup> One dismayed Ohio rosarian described the usual HT as “a congenital weakling which Nature would surely eliminate, if it were not for an unremitting toil on man’s part to save the strain from perdition, for the sake of the haunting elegance with which it flowers.” (Rev. M. C. Clancy, “A New Breeding Departure,” *American Rose Annual* 40 (1955), 125-131; see p. 125)

a lovely very double light apricot; LILY PONS, with her large, creamy yellow star-like flowers; PINK PRINCESS, famous for her disease resistance and hardiness; EARLY MORN, whose soft shell-pink flowers reflect its DR. W. VAN FLEET parentage; the true, unfading yellow V-FOR-VICTORY, and the remarkable ANNE VANDERBILT with her large, open, semi-double flowers of reddish-orange streaked yellow.

Brownell followed these by a fine group of pinks and reds, all obtained from crosses of his very successful PINK PRINCESS and the famed Kordes HT CRIMSON GLORY. Examples include CURLY PINK, with two-toned quartered flowers; DOLLY DARLING, spreading her warm pink semi-double petals around crimson anthers; QUEEN O' THE LAKES, with her large, waved, deep red flowers; the buxom RED DUCHESS, which the Brownells considered their best HT overall for color, fragrance, hardiness, and vigor; and VELVETIER, a dark, glowing red with deeper maroon overlay. And from CURLY PINK then came such enticing varieties as DELIGHTFUL, with warm melon-yellow tinted red flowers, and PINK BOUQUET, a soft pink and yellow medley. These deliciously mingled yellow/orange shades were to reappear in other excellent Brownell HT varieties, such as LAFTER, TIP TOES, HELEN HAYES, and ORANGE RUFFELS.

Walter Brownell retired from his career as a lawyer in the early 1940s to give full-time attention to rose hybridizing. With his wife Josephine (who helped but did not hybridize) and sons Walter D. Brownell, Jr., and Herbert C. Brownell, by the early 1950s he had built the Brownell Nursery into a major commercial operation. Brownell cultivars, including the HTs that by then had been named "sub-zero" roses, were sold worldwide. Each year some 20,000 new hybrid seedlings were being raised in Little Compton for evaluation and possible introduction. The Brownells' extensive growing fields and beautiful display gardens were major attractions for visitors to the region, as was the congenial Rose Tea held at their home every June. Brownell received international acclaim for his work. In recognition of his rose accomplishments, he was awarded the honorary degree of Doctor of Horticultural Science by the University of Rhode Island in 1955.

The Brownell HTs represented significant improvements to the class. They were stronger growing, more fragrant, and longer-lived than most HTs of the time. Blackspot resistance was notably enhanced, though variable within the group. Greater winter-hardiness had also been achieved, yet admittedly not to the degree hoped. Reports have shown that though sturdier than most modern HTs, their



Dr. Brownell (right) and his eldest son, Walter D. Brownell, Jr., examining a pillar rose.



cane-hardiness does not extend beyond the  $-5$  to  $-10$  °F range. Many exhibition HT growers were never happy with the often informal, more old-fashioned flowers, and own-root Brownell roses are rather problematic except perhaps for the warmest zones. Nonetheless, Dr. Brownell's HT program had made valuable advances.

Following Walter Brownell's death in 1957, his younger son Herbert continued the work at Little Compton. Changes can be observed in this second-generation Brownell hybridization, however. Flowers generally had bolder, more strident colors, heavier petalage, more exhibition form, and rather less fragrance (SENIOR PROM, MARIA STERN, MARGARET CHASE SMITH, CHARLOTTE BROWNELL). The Brownell rose business eventually came to an end in the late 1960s. Thereafter, Brownell HTs were sold by various discount nurseries controlled by a larger gardening conglomerate. Regrettably, and one must say unconscionably, they were allowed to become riddled with rose mosaic virus and grown on the incompatible DR. HUEY rootstock. Thus the Brownell roses suffered a serious decline in reputation (and ARS ratings) through no fault of their own.

On a brighter note, several more reputable heritage rose nurseries currently offer healthy Brownell varieties from older, non-virus stock, and more may perhaps reappear in commerce. Special credit is due to my friend Dorrie B. Nichols, Dr.





TOP ROW, LEFT TO RIGHT:  
Anne Vanderbilt, Dolly Darling, Helen  
Hayes, Orange Ruffels, Velvetier,  
Queen o' the Lakes.

MIDDLE ROW, LEFT TO RIGHT:  
Pink Princess, Lafter, Early Morn,  
V for Victory, Arctic Flame.

Photos by Dan Russo



Brownell's granddaughter, for her efforts to locate and preserve healthy Brownell cultivars. There is a very good collection of Brownell HTs, with plants donated by Brownell family members and dedicated collectors, at Roger Williams Park in Providence, Rhode Island, and smaller but admirable ones at the Cranford Rose Garden in Brooklyn, New York, and at Elizabeth Park in Hartford, Connecticut.

With his significant contribution to the long line of HT development, Walter Brownell clearly did much for the betterment of HTs and other roses. In a sense, his work may be seen as the concluding chapters in the heritage HT story and as a bridge into the modern HT era, for Walter Brownell's varieties were used directly in later wide-ranging breeding programs, including those of Wilhelm Kordes, Ralph Moore, Alain Meillard, and Griffith Buck.

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DAN RUSSO is an historian who grows and knows Brownell roses of all types. His own main garden is in Little Compton, Rhode Island, former hometown of the Brownell Nursery. With the help of Brownell family members and concerned collectors, Dan has been involved for over a decade in an ongoing program to preserve these historically important roses. He strongly wishes to acknowledge and commend their dedicated rose conservation efforts. (The bibliography for this article is included in the electronic version at [www.heritagerosesfoundation.org](http://www.heritagerosesfoundation.org).)