



An Interview with Thérèse Loubert

Gregg Lowery

I first came to know the name Loubert and the exceptional collection of species roses in a village in France through a delightful website created by Bernard Loubert, son of Raymond and Thérèse Loubert. Never dreaming I would ever see the collection, much less meet its makers, I was invited by Raymond and Thérèse to visit them during a trip I had planned to France in December of 2008. This interview grew out of a conversation in their home over great food, vintage wines, and a wintry post-prandial hike through fields of newly pruned old roses.

In the early years of your nursery you were growing fruit trees, roses and other shrubs. How did your collection of mother plants evolve?

We had a contract nursery and sold plants to some large nursery houses including Delbard, Minier, Clause, and other Angevine nurseries. Vilmorin, to whom we sold as well, had established their nursery nearby at La Ménittré, and they entrusted their collection of plants to us.

We were cultivating a good number of fruit trees, including apples, pears, peaches, and nectarines, and sold budwood to tree nurseries. Raymond also gave them advice on sound growing practices. And at the time we were also raising quite a few ornamental shrubs, including thujas, lilacs, cotoneasters, and privets—in short, the offerings of a general nursery.

How did you happen to settle at Les-Rosiers-sur-Loire?

We moved to Les-Rosiers-sur-Loire in 1963 to be closer to our parents, who lived in the area. Raymond at the time was in charge of research in fruit trees for the Delbard nursery. As we continued to maintain good relations with that firm, we made a decision to strike out on our own. While planting three hectares of pear orchard, in the rows between we added strawberries as a way to see a financial return on the land right away. But it took us ten years to be able finally to live on the production from our own enterprise.

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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: 'Mme de Sancy de Parabère', *Rosa omeiensis pteracantha*, 'Gilbert Nabonnand' (photos by Étienne Bouret)





At what point did you begin collecting roses, and what roses first caught your attention? How did the collection evolve?

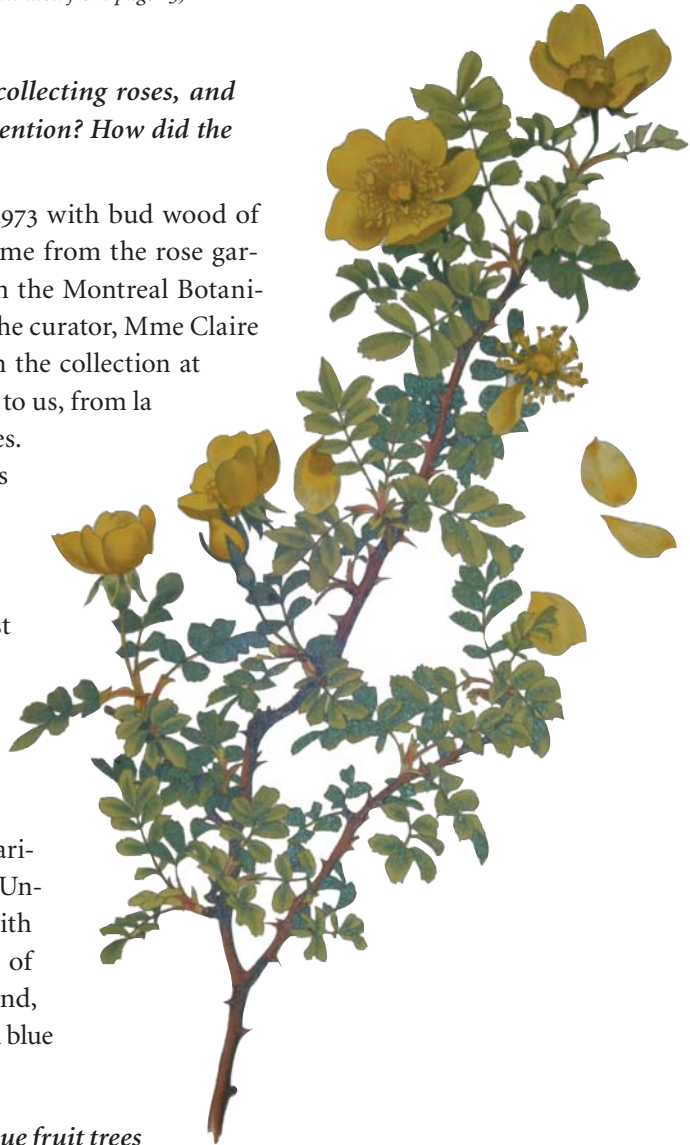
Our rose collection began in 1973 with bud wood of mostly species roses, which came from the rose garden at l'Haÿ-les-roses and from the Montreal Botanical Garden, where we had met the curator, Mme Claire Laberge. Then came roses from the collection at Sangerhausen and, much closer to us, from la Roserie de la Beaujoire in Nantes.

Among the first cultivars were Scots roses, so many of which are very similar. The most remarkable rose for me was *Rosa ecae*, one of our first acquisitions, which has survived the test of time. In the spring of 2008, we replanted the entire collection of species roses in an effort to avoid the loss of any variety. Later our dear friend Erich Unmuth of Austria provided us with virtually our entire collection of the roses of Rudolph Geschwind, the first rose breeder to approach blue coloring with his mauve roses.

Your collection of historic/antique fruit trees is impressive. How did this collection start? Are there still nurseries in France that are interested in obtaining bud wood from your tree collection?

We grow about 250 types of apples both antique and modern, as well as 70 pear varieties and 50 cherry cultivars, many of which have suffered in our wet conditions. We also have a number of apricots, which are also difficult to grow well in our area and only produce fruit one year in five.

Very few fruit tree growers in France are interested in growing antique cultivars, maintaining that they are not as saleable as the modern, well-known varieties common



TOP LEFT: *Rosa latibracteata*

BOTTOM LEFT: *Rosa hulthemosa* × *hardii*
(photo by Étienne Bouret)

ABOVE: *Rosa ecae* (from *The Genus Rosa* by Ellen Willmott, illustration by Alfred Parsons, London 1914)



TOP: *Rosa lucens erecta*

ABOVE: *Rosa fedtschenkoana*

TOP RIGHT: Thérèse and Raymond Loubert standing in front of 'Jubilé Loubert'

BOTTOM RIGHT: *Rosa henryi* (photos by Bernard Loubert)

today in markets—all too few in number—like 'Golden Delicious', 'Granny Smith', 'Starking', 'Pink Lady', and 'Tentation'. Among older varieties that are still grown locally here are 'Reinette du Mans' and 'Reinette Grise'. One of our favorite old pears for flavor and good storage is 'Fondante Thirriot', a delicious though small-fruited cultivar.

Could you describe how you grow your roses and fruit trees and how the nursery is laid out?

We handle our mother plants just as we have the plants we grow for sale. From the fields of mother plants we take bud sticks for grafting new plants in the nursery. Year after year we renew part of our mother stock in order to preserve the diversity of the collection. Just last summer we marked a number of varieties that needed replanting that we were at risk of losing.

What are some of your favorite roses?

That's hard to answer. They're so different. The species roses, of course, including the marvelous *Rosa ecae*, and the Moyesii roses, and the superb Gallicas, and the Tea roses of Nabonnand, which are so remon-

tant for us and of such delicate coloring . . . in short we love them all.

How did the status of National Collection of Species Roses come to be bestowed on your collection? Does the collection receive any support from the National Collections scheme?

The Société d'Horticulture Angevine encouraged us to apply for special status with the CCVS (the French national plants collections system). After their visit we were nominated for the National Collection in 2001. We don't receive any assistance from the CCVS.

You have belonged to a community of rosarians in France for many years. How has this enriched your lives?

We've had wonderful relations with our colleagues in the nursery business, and have introduced many of their new roses through our offerings, promoting both old and modern roses.

What was the rose that you introduced that was awarded a prize?

The rose appeared like a gift as a sport in our collection, and coincided with our 50th wedding anniversary. It won a Certificate of Merit in 2001 and is called 'Jubilé Loubert'.

Is there any one species rose that you long wanted to grow in your garden that has eluded you?

One that has not eluded us but that we have lost is *Rosa × hardii*. Our climate was simply too cold and too damp and didn't suit it.

GREGG LOWERY, author of *Vintage Gardens Book of Roses*, is vice president of publications for the *Heritage Rose Foundation*. He is a garden designer and is currently working on the design of a new rose collection and garden for the *Albuquerque Botanic Gardens*.

