

IN THE GARDEN

A Garden Miracle: Roses Made Easier

By ANNE RAVER Published: March 29, 2007

I GREW up with roses that were sprayed so heavily with pesticides that I probably risked my life sniffing them.

But there were, and are, alternatives to roses that need to be doused in deadly liquids. At a recent gathering of rosarians at the Brooklyn Botanic Garden, Wilhelm Kordes III, a fourth-generation rose breeder from Sparrieshoop, Germany, showed images of his latest disease-resistant beauties, grown with no pesticides, distinguished by sumptuous shapes and velvety petals.

There was Laguna, a deep pink climber: "very double, old-fashioned, with a lovely fragrance," Mr. Kordes said in his slow, elegant English. "That, I think, will have a great future."

There were the new Fairy Tale shrub roses, like Brothers Grimm, a study of yellows and deep orange-red: "enchanted, fully double, fragrant," Mr. Kordes went on.

He showed off other favorites, like Lion's Rose, a pale pink floribunda: "no diseases, a lovely shape, the color very nice," he said.

Mr. Kordes had just arrived from the Huntington Botanical Gardens, in San Marino, Calif., where he was honored as this year's great rosarian of the world. The lecture series in California was started seven years ago by Clair G. Martin, the Huntington's rose curator, to introduce Americans to a wider selection of roses.

Past winners include Peter Beales, the British rosarian; Ralph Moore, the 100-year-old American hybridizer who developed the modern miniature rose; and Viru and Girija Viraraghavan, a husband-and-wife team in India who are bringing heat-tolerant roses to the United States.

This year, with financing from the Manhattan Rose Society and the Metropolitan Rose Council, the Huntington tradition became a bicoastal affair, as Mr. Kordes and Mr. Martin came to New York to join a lively discussion on rose trends at the New York Botanical Garden and the Brooklyn events.

Low maintenance and disease resistance are key, but so too, are beauty and fragrance. And because gardeners are more aware of the dangers of pesticides, they are paying more

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And because gardeners are more aware of the dangers of pesticides, they are paying more attention to the soil, which is the basis for healthy plants.

So I heard a lot about mulch.

“Mushroom compost,” said Anne O’Neill, the curator of the Cranford Rose Garden at the Brooklyn Botanic Garden. “Or Sweet Peet,” she added, referring to an organic commercial mix of aged horse manure mixed with wood shavings ([sweetpeet.com](http://sweetpeet.com)).

“One inch is all you need,” Ms. O’Neill said, and you will do a favor not only for your roses, but also for all those creatures in the soil.

There was much discussion, too, about the Knock Out roses developed by William Radler, a breeder in Milwaukee.

“Double Knock Out Red is as completely free of black spot as any rose around,” said Mr. Martin, the curator of the rose and perennial gardens at Huntington.

Pat Shanley, the president of the Manhattan Rose Society, loves the Double Pink Knock Out, because it blooms all summer long.

“Bill Radler has shown people that it’s fun to grow roses,” she said. “And you don’t have to put your life and the environment at risk to grow them.”

But there are others of us who think a rose should be more than a bubblegum-pink ground cover.

As some gushed about the Knock Outs, Ms. O’Neill damned it with faint praise: “It’s a landscape rose, not more, not less.”

“But it’s not romantic, not gentle, not soft,” she said. “It doesn’t knock you over, which a rose should. There should be a decadence and a romance to a rose. Like an old gallica that you want to get under and just inhale, touch the petals.”

She recalled the old roses of her grandfather’s garden in County Carlow, Ireland: “They were soft, like tissue paper, and very fragrant.”

Knock Out roses have no fragrance, or very little. But like those indestructible petunias produced by Proven Winners, another mass marketer, these roses could be grown by anyone, anywhere. They have taken the fear factor out of growing roses. But do they make a garden interesting, even unforgettable? No.

Mr. Kordes’s roses, on the other hand, are sturdy, and they come in many colors, from creamy white and yellow to apricot and deep red. There are climbers, and shrub roses, and compact types perfect for the patio.

And they all say no to drugs. When Mr. Kordes took over the family nursery 17 years ago, he stopped spraying the fields of roses.

“My uncle asked me if it was my aim to run the nursery into the ground,” Mr. Kordes said, chuckling, as he showed pictures of his test fields in the early 1990s.

Row upon row of bare sticks, where lush green bushes full of flowers had once grown, marked the immediate losers.

But here and there, patches of color and lush green leaves signaled those survivors that stood up to black spot and mildew.

These roses, which have been hard to find in the United States, are now available at



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Kordes roses ([www.kordesroses.com](http://www.kordesroses.com)) have been workhorses for decades: I have Dortmund, a cherry red climber, introduced in the 1950s, growing in my own garden. I don't think I've ever seen a black spot on its tough, shiny green leaves. My father grew Crimson Glory, a hybrid tea introduced by Mr. Kordes's grandfather, Wilhelm II, in 1935. But in Maryland, its satiny deep red petals needed plenty of postwar chemicals to keep the blooms perfect. Kordes dropped it in 2005, in favor of newer, more disease-resistant varieties.

Now, Earth Kind Roses, ([earthkindroses.tamu.edu](http://earthkindroses.tamu.edu)), selected by a kind of tough love research program started by Steven W. George at [Texas A&M University](http://Texas A&M University), has a list of 13 roses that can withstand drought and heat and almost any kind of soil. And more roses are being tested in trial gardens around the country.

Marilyn Wellan, a past president of the American Rose Society, described the Texas A&M test site in Dallas, where 117 rose cultivars were planted "in the worst conditions," she said. "They just put them in a hole, drip-irrigated the first year, and mulched with wood chips."

"Those bushes were never sprayed, pruned or deadheaded," Mrs. Wellan said. "By the end of the second year, all but 11 cultivars died."

The survivors include 19th-century favorites like Mutabilis, a China rose, whose single petals open yellow, then deepen to orange and red; Perle d'Or, a peachy polyantha with a powerful scent; and Duchesse de Brabant, a pink cabbage-style rose with a tea fragrance, as well as modern shrub roses like Knock Out and Carefree Beauty.

Rose lovers can help widen that selection by testing Earth Kind candidates in their own gardens.

"Join the Rose Brigade to test roses for A&M," Mrs. Wellan said. "We're looking for roses good for the colder zones."

I'm wondering if they need a nice, humid test garden in Maryland, which feels like the world's epicenter for Japanese beetles, the rose's most indomitable pest. Though milky spore powder, a natural bacteria, can keep the population down, I still have to go out each morning and pick off the beetles.

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