

At a time when few nurseries in the United States offered solid collections of old roses, and own root roses were even harder to obtain, Vintage Gardens, the brainchild of Phillip Robinson & George Matson, began in 1984 as a simple, backyard nursery, selling roses at Heritage Roses Group meetings and holding garage-sale rose events in May. Our collection began with roses that George had gathered from old rose growers and nurseries like Joseph Kern in Ohio, and had shared with Phillip. At the Korbel House, where Phillip had renovated a nineteenth century garden, he discovered a treasure trove of early Hybrid Teas that were added to his own prodigious collection. Phillip had collected founding roses from cemeteries and home sites across Northern California, and had begun to identify long-lost roses that had not been in commerce for decades. More roses came from Gregg Lowery in 1983, and before long a collection of about two thousand old and rare roses had come together.

Sharing Heritage Roses

The depth of our collection was shared through presentations that Phillip made to Heritage Rose Group meetings and at Heritage Rose conferences at the Huntington Gardens. In an era when Tea roses were seldom grown, and Hybrid Perpetuals only vaguely understood by gardeners, Phillip's thoughtful overviews of Teas, Hybrid Perpetuals, Damask Perpetuals, Bourbons, Noisettes and Old Hybrid Teas helped to build interest in these garden-worthy plants. This period of the blossoming of interest in old roses in America drew thousands to visit our garden, and to see these rare roses growing to their full potential in combination with other old and beautiful plant companions.

A Mail-Order & a Retail Nursery

While Phillip and I were both occupied in our professions as garden-makers, and both equally tied to the responsibility of maintaining the collection of roses, we saw the need to expand the nursery and to make these rare plants available to a larger audience of gardeners. In 1990 I increased our production and began offering our roses via mail order. Our first catalogue was released to a very receptive audience across the nation.

By 1994 demand for Vintage Gardens' plants had increased so dramatically that we launched a retail store along the main highway to our rural town of Sebastopol. And, in 1996 when an opportunity arose for us to purchase an old nursery site nearby, we moved our retail nursery of old roses and heirloom plants to this new site. Our offerings had grown to include a superb collection of historic hydrangeas,

antique Iris, Coleus and Canna collections, and a wealth of old fashioned plants many of which we had gathered, along with roses, in old cemeteries, home sites and waysides.

Our retail nursery had begun its life in a time when most nursery plants were offered only by plant nurseries, just prior to the great expansion of home improvement centers and mega-stores like Walmart. With these came the advent of a nursery in every corporate retail center, and with that era came a new attitude that money cannot be made on plants, but only on related products like tools and fertilizers. As plants became cheaper and cheaper in these stores, the family nursery business began to falter and die, unable to compete with corporate retailing of dry goods or with the treatment of plants as loss-leaders, priced below their wholesale cost. After twelve years we too were unable to continue to operate a retail nursery.

Back to Basics

Blessed with a loyal following of old rose lovers, who have supported our mail order nursery from the start, we made the choice to return to where we began, and to concentrate on growing and sharing our splendid collection of roses, old, classic and modern with our mail order customers. In 2006 we sold the retail nursery site and moved our operations to the nearby property of our partner, Gita Phy. Our own garden on Pleasant Hill Road in Sebastopol remains the repository and garden of our rose collection, and, as we have over the past 25 years, we continue to open it to our friends and customers each weekend in the month of May when roses reach their first peak.

Garden Valley Ranch

When we closed our own retail outlet we were invited by the kind folks at Garden Valley Ranch in Petaluma to use a part of their nursery to showcase our roses. It provided us with lots of rewarding opportunities to work on conferences, offer workshops and have an occasional chance to meet our customers. The maintenance of that space has proven difficult for us, and we have brought all of our rose stock back to our mail-order nursery. We know this will allow us to focus once again fully on our mission.

A Garden and Collection of Roses

Our garden is a two-acre haven for old roses, a place of great beauty

and an encyclopedia and treasure trove for lovers of roses. Its creation has been a work of love, blessed in its early years by the youth of its creators. Bedeviled now by a less agile body I strive to maintain the garden, sort through and keep alive the thousands of cultivars, and work on the daily operations of the nursery along with Gita. Phillip who suffers from a disabling illness is no longer able to attend to the garden or the roses, or to maintain the database of roses.

Dirt Days and the Friends of Vintage Gardens

The challenges we face would be dispiriting indeed were it not for an amazing group of friends who have rallied round us during the past five years. These friends were customers to our retail nursery and great supporters and admirers of our garden. When they saw that we had begun to fall short in keeping the garden at its best, they stepped in and created the 'Friends of Vintage Gardens'. They appear two or three times each year, like a posse of rose deputes, with gloves and tools and a magnificent spread of pot luck food and wine. These 'Dirt Days' go by with extraordinary feats of work and accomplishments, including the complete planting of our Old Hybrid Tea garden, and massive weeding and mulching efforts. Thanks to them, the garden continues to be worthy of a visit each May, and the collection of roses gains another year of life.

Without Vintage...?

Our most recent challenge has come with the unstable economy in 2008, as our customers begin to cut back on spending and on purchasing roses. The nursery business—the real business of propagating and selling plants—is an industry with a very tiny margin of profit; most nursery folks just make enough to live a modest life and pay their bills. The loss of a small percent of business can spell the end of the nursery, and we have faced that during the past months. Our aim is to continue, and with the astonishing good will of our customers, and the phenomenal influx of orders that have come from you during the past weeks since we announced the possibility of closing, we now have a strong hope that Vintage Gardens will continue.

We thank you all for the hundreds of expressions of appreciation and support for what we do. We go forth each day spreading the beauty of each rose in honor of you.