

# Romance of Old Roses



## The story of how I came to appreciate old roses

Story by Rayford Clayton      Photos by Robert Galyean

When I wrote *Growing Good Roses*, I declared open love for Modern Roses. Not only was I hopelessly smitten by roses that bloomed repeatedly from Mother's Day to Halloween, I became so rose-struck that I wasn't satisfied until I went commercial and began growing roses for the sale of their irresistible blossoms.

Once I had my rose ranch with 4,000 bushes blooming their heads off for more than half the year, I decided to find out for myself why everyone fussed so over Old garden roses. Although I didn't hold great expectations for their marketability as cut flowers, I planted 40 shrubs of Old Roses that enthusiasts agreed were picks of the litter.

Just as I predicted, my Old Roses proved a flop at the flower market. First, their stems were short compared with the 3-footers I cut from my Modern varieties. Then, their blooms came all at once, making it impossible to plan around their flushes.

Still, I noticed certain enviable characteristics. Because I had been assured that these varieties needed no pampering, I gave them none. I fed them only with leftover fertilizers, and I didn't spray them with those chemicals I dared not withhold from my Modern Roses. In spite of my neglect, my Old Roses didn't just grow, they flourished, and each successive season brought more blossoms than I had imagined possible.



Medallion 'South Seas' x 'Kings Ransom'



'Raubritter' is the most quintessential Ground-cover rose

One day, a fine gardener, whose opinions I respect, stopped by for lunch. "You know, Ray," she said, "you've simply developed tunnel vision where roses are concerned. If a bush doesn't bloom all summer, you don't think it's worth the dirt it's planted in."

Although her frank words startled me, I snapped to attention when she asked what it would take to get my precious wisteria, lilacs, bearded irises, or daphne away from me.

"Oh, something like the marines," I answered truthfully. "Well, there you are," she said, smiling smugly over her round-one victory, "you simply have to stop comparing Old Roses with their Modern upstarts, and begin treasuring them the way you do other one-time bloomers."

She had a point. "Still," I said, "they won't sell at the flower market."

"Oh, to hell with the flower market," she retorted. "Try landscaping a few dowagers in that fragrant garden of yours and see how unwillingly you'd turn loose of them after two years."

As you've guessed, she was proved correct, I wrong. I couldn't dig holes fast enough to accommodate 100 new (to me) Old Roses. Roses, I yearned to cultivate their grandparents.



This is the fabulous rose 'Alister Stela Gray'