

History of Roses: Alba Roses

By Jerry Haynes



'Alba Semi-Plena'

<http://www.davidaustinroses.com>

Alba Roses are hybrids whose antiquity may go back further than the Roman Empire. Pliny, who lived from 23-79 A.D., mentioned white roses in his *Natural History*. Botanists believe these roses may have been Albas.

Graham Thomas supports Dr. C. C. Hurst's theory that Albas are derived from the dog rose, *Rosa canina*, and the Damask rose, *Rosa damascena*. Genetic studies may reveal a bit more about the heritage of Alba roses, but many roses carry part of the *Rosa Gallica* genome and who is to say it is derived from what rose?



'Alba Maxima'

<http://www.vintagegardens.com>

'Alba Maxima' is close to an archetypal white rose; it is also one of the oldest roses grown in gardens today. Boccaccio (1313-1375), writer of the **Decameron**, was quoted by Julia Cartwright in **Italian Gardens of the Renaissance**. Boccaccio described the beautiful gardens near Rome: "the beauties of these gardens, of the broad alleys shaded by pergolas laden with purple grapes, and bordered with red and white roses and jessamine". There is a good chance the

white roses that Boccaccio spoke of were either 'Alba Maxima' or 'Alba Semi-Plena', which still embellish Florentine gardens to this day. 'Alba Maxima' was painted by Italian masters of the fifteenth century. This might be due to the fact that 'Alba Maxima' is a beautiful white rose, which could symbolize the definitive white rose. E.Y. Bunyard believed that 'Alba Maxima', as well as 'Maiden's Blush', were painted in **The Birth of Venus** by Botticelli. 'Alba Maxima' also appears in many Dutch masterpieces of the eighteenth century. There has been a good share of debate over whether 'Alba Maxima' is the Rose of York, a symbol of English political power. Some experts believe The Rose of York refers to 'Alba Semi-Plena', while Graham Thomas believes it is probably 'Rosa arvensis'. 'Alba Maxima' can sport to 'Alba Semi-Plena' and 'Alba Semi-Plena' can sport to 'Alba Maxima' and this can account for some of the confusion about these roses. 'Alba Maxima' is like a fuller version of 'Alba Semi-Plena'. Jack Harkness wrote that the history of 'Alba Maxima' was lost in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century. What is certain is that the rose is a noble white rose, with many other names such as 'The Jacobite Rose', 'Great Double White', 'The Bonnie Prince Charlie's Rose'. Redouté's **Rosa alba flore plena** is 'Alba Semi-Plena'. There are stories of 'Alba Maxima' still surviving for many years in a place where a home once stood. The rose can tolerate some severe conditions. They are nicely scented of damask and citrus, even tangerine tones. The rose is healthy, with beautiful foliage that has a blue glow. It is about six feet high and upright.

Albas make elegant upright shrubs with beautiful blue-green foliage, which some may call grey. Botanists have differentiated the Albas from other roses by their grey, scentless leaflets. They only bloom in spring. They have delicate coloring ranging from white through exquisite soft shades of pink. They are resistant to disease for the most part. Many can tolerate shade, drought, and are winter hardy.

Christopher Brickell suggests pruning Albas like Centifolias, Mosses, and most Damasks. He groups these roses together because they mainly flower on short lateral and sublateral shoots produced from second-year or older wood. These roses also regularly produce vigorous basal or near-basal shoots, which may grow 5-8 feet in one season. He suggests tipping back unripe or damaged shoots in the first year. For the second and following years, he suggests cutting back long new basal growths by up to one-third in February or March. He notes that care must be taken not to cut back the new shoots too much or the elegant arched habit can be lost. He also recommends cutting back laterals on flowered shoots to 2-3 eyes or 4-6 inches. It is also a good idea to cut out any badly placed shoots. In addition, summer dead-heading and tipping back extra-long growths to minimize wind-rock is encouraged in September to November.

Many prominent artists including Botticelli, Luini, Crivelli, Schoengauer, da Zevio, and van Spaendonck illustrated Albas. The following are links to some Albas in works of art:

da Zevio's 'Madonna in the Rosary' (Dated 1410)

Schoengauer's 'Madonna of the Rose Bush' (Dated 1473)

Botticelli's 'The Birth of Venus' (Dated c.1485)

Carlo Crivelli's 'Virgin with St. Francis and St. Sebastian' (Dated 1491)



‘Felicite Parmentier’

<http://www.vintagegardens.com>

Alba roses are very winter hardy, have good disease resistance and very fragrant flowers. It is hard to choose just one, but if I had to, I would choose the Alba Rose **‘Félicité Parmentier’**, and not ‘Königin Von Dänemark’ - Queen of Denmark. ‘Félicité Parmentier’ was bred in Belgium before 1836, by Louis-Joseph-Ghislain Parmentier. ‘Félicité Parmentier’ is smaller than many other Alba Roses—rarely growing more than 4-5 feet tall and 3 feet wide, and have a more upright growth habit than the larger, more lax growing Alba roses. It grows and flowers well even in a fairly shaded position with only 3-4 hours of direct sunlight. Alba roses tolerate more shade than other groups of roses, but they still need direct sunlight to produce flowers. Like many other old garden roses it takes the plant about 4 years to form a nice little rose bush that flowers more and more each year. The first years it is best to prune it lightly and then cut the canes and laterals down by a third, after it has flowered. Shape the bush pruning it lightly in the spring. If you have more room, you do not have to prune it at all; it will become more arching and wide. Only take out some of the older dead canes if needed.

It is the flowers of ‘Félicité Parmentier’ that make it my favorite Alba rose. In spite of the name Alba, meaning white, the flowers are not really white. The buds have a yellow green color, and when they develop, we first see a little circular opening showing pink petals. As the flower develops, it opens into blush pink rosette shaped flowers that reflex into a dome-shaped or pompom-shaped flower that fades to white. The flowers are very strongly scented—not that the scent "carries on air" but when smelling the individual flowers, they have a very strong, sharp, spicy rose scent that is wonderful. The flowers are fairly small, only about 1.5 - 2 inches/3-5 cm across. ‘Félicité Parmentier’ flowers for about 4-6 weeks. Like most roses with many thin petals they do not like rain much, which makes them unsightly.

The following is a list of some prominent Alba roses. Think about adding at least one to your garden:

[‘Alba Maxima’ \(before 1867\)](#)

‘Alba Semi-plena’, *R. × alba semi-plena* (Seringe), *R. × alba suaveolens* (Dieck),

[‘Belle Aurore’, Alba, Descemet, about 1815\)](#)

[‘Céleste’ see ‘Celestial’ \(before 1810\)](#)

[‘Chloris’ \(Descemet, before 1820\)](#)

'Cuisse de Nymph', 'Great Maiden's Blush', '*R. alba* x *var. Incarnata*' (Weston), (before 1500)

'Félicité Parmentier' (before 1834)

'Königin von Dänemark', 'Queen of Denmark' (Broth, 1816)

'Maidens's Blush', 'Small Maiden's Blush' (Kew Gardens, 1802)

Dumont de Courset