

History of Roses: China Roses

By Jerry Haynes



Arguably, the most important contribution to the world of roses was the introduction of China Roses to the West at the end of the eighteenth century. The four stud Chinas, introduced between 1792 and 1824, caused a huge change in the variety and characteristics of the gene pool, allowing for the creation of new and exciting roses. The arrival of the China Roses changed the rose world profoundly.

Chrysanthemums appear more prominently than roses in the most ancient art forms of China. Chrysanthemums were first cultivated in [China](#) as a flowering [herb](#) as far back as the 15th century BC. An ancient Chinese city ([Xiaolan Town](#) of [Zhongshan](#) City) was named Ju-Xian, meaning "chrysanthemum city". The plant is particularly significant during the [Double Ninth Festival](#).

Roses are a comparative newcomer, only mentioned as far back as the 14th century BC... Actually, no one knows how long roses have been cultivated, cross-bred, hybridized and obsessed-over in China. During the time of Confucius, over 2500 years ago, there were said to have been hundreds of

books at the Imperial Palace that mentioned the rose. The Zhongguo Huajing (Chinese Floral Encyclopedia) mentions widespread rose culture in the 4th and 5th centuries AD. By the Song Dynasty (960 to 1279 AD), references exist to "Yuejihua," or perpetual-flowering roses that were extensively cultivated in large cities with large numbers of varieties. By the Ming Dynasty (1368 to 1644), Yuejihua and Qiangwei (rose culture) were common, with many different varieties in cultivation. Given this ancient history, rose culture in China was probably the most advanced in the world until Empress Josephine created Malmaison, in regard to both the number of cultivars developed and cultivation techniques.

The China roses are actually a complex (you can say complex again...) mixture of natural and cultivated hybrids that have evolved over more than three thousand years in Chinese gardens. Screen paintings from the 10th century depict a blush China rose identical to Hume's Tea-Scented China, one of the four China stud roses brought to Europe in the early 19th century. The painting "*Allegory with Venus and Cupid*" (1529) by the Florentine renaissance Painter Angelo Bronzino (1503 to 1572) is the first visual reference to the China rose known in Europe. (Bronzino's painting will not be shown here because *Roses on the Red* is a family newsletter...) The same pink China may also be the subject described in 1678 by Montaigne at the Jesuit Monastery at Ferrara, Italy, said to be in perpetual flower.

Part of the problem in absolutely identifying China rose cultivars is that over thousands of years, sports, mutations and genetic drift have occurred to obscure which Chinese rose existed in whose garden, where, and when that rose first existed there. In 1885, when Dr. Augustine Henry (1857-1930) made his famous discovery of what would later be named as the wild species rose, the primary ancestor of '*R. chinensis*' and the China roses was finally identified. Henry, having arrived in Hong Kong in 1881, later traveled up the Yangtze River to the customs post at Ichang. He found the rose in a narrow ravine extending from the Yangtze to the north, near the San-yu-tung glen, and the cave and temple of the Three Pilgrims. It was a climber like *R. banksiae* with three to five leaflets per leaf and solitary flowers generally of deep red but sometimes pink. It is now known that flower color of this wild species varies from almost white to deep crimson. Actually, 93 species roses and 144 varieties are native to China. The wild Tea rose, *R. odorata* var. *gigantea*, native to upper Burma and

southwestern China, was introduced to Europe in 1888, having been discovered by Sir Henry Collett in the Shan Hills of Burma in 1824. *R. odorata*, in like manner as *R. chinensis*, refers now to garden varieties and hybrids (the “old” Tea roses), and so the wild species, also identified later in this case, was named *R. odorata var. gigantea*, or *R. gigantea*, depending upon the authority cited, to distinguish it from its cultivated descendents. Having been absorbed into the Hybrid Tea lineage, old Tea roses, as developed in China over the centuries, are now very rare. One very popular survivor is ‘Fortune’s Double Yellow’, discovered in 1845 by the famous plant thief, er... hunter, Robert Fortune in “a rich Mandarin’s garden at Ningpo.”

The Wardian case, the direct forerunner of the modern [terrarium](#) (and the inspiration for the glass [aquarium](#)) was invented by Dr [Nathaniel Bagshaw Ward](#) (1791–1868), of London, in about 1829 when he found that plants survived London's poisonous atmosphere of coal smoke and [sulfuric acid](#) when placed in a covered glazed case. This invention made it possible to ship plants back from China.

The understanding of both ancient and modern rose genealogies was greatly advanced in the early and mid-20th century by the pioneering genetic research of Dr. C. C. Hurst (1870-1947). His studies of cytology and chromosomal inheritance, though performed at the infancy of genetic science in the 1930s, have not been challenged to this day.

Inspired by Mendel’s papers on inheritance, which were discovered in 1900, and working with William Bateson of the John Innes Horticultural Institute, Hurst developed a foundation for studies in both plant and animal genetics. He founded the Burbage Experiment Station for Genetics in Leicestershire, England , working with pedigree rose stocks and many other genera, and collecting numerous books. After World War I, with his station facilities in neglect and depleted of specimens, staff, and money, he performed extensive cytology research on roses at Cambridge University. His opus, "Notes on the origin and evolution of our Garden Roses" is reproduced in "The Graham Stuart Thomas Rose Book", and Hurst describes the Four Stud China Roses.

The Four Stud China Roses

Dr. Hurst determined that three of the four stud roses are hybrids of the two wild-source species, the exception being ‘Slater’s Crimson China’, determined to be solely derived from *R. chinensis var. spontanea*. All four are perpetual-flowering and of dwarf habit, and demonstrate completely different leaves, twigs, and fragrance than had previously existed in the old roses of Europe.



‘Slater’s Crimson China’

Photo from Rogue Valley Roses at

<http://www.roguevalleyroses.com/home.php>

Number One: ‘Slater’s Crimson China’ was imported by Gilbert Slater of Knot’s Green, Leytonstone in 1792, and by 1798, the French, who dominated rose breeding efforts at the time, had begun hybridization experiments. Within a couple of years, rose plants had been distributed to Austria, Germany, and Italy. (A very closely related form is actually believed to have existed in Italy since the mid-17th century.) Descriptions of this rose, as well as drawings by Willmott from 1911, indicate a close similarity to Henry’s discovery of its wild progenitor in 1885, yet differ in regard to the perennial flowering, dwarf habit, and semi-double flowers displayed by ‘Slater’s Crimson China’. Additionally, this hybrid’s extremely low fertility rate of 14 percent, as determined by Hurst, argues for its status as a facilitated hybrid, only able to have survived and evolved in cultivation.



'Old Blush'

Photo from Vintage Gardens at
<http://www.vintagegardens.com/>

garden". From now on, when you ordered 'Monthly Roses' you would expect to receive, not 'Autumn Damask', but 'Parsons' Pink China' or one of its near relations

'Parsons' Pink China' was introduced in England in 1793 by Sir Joseph Banks, the Director of Kew Gardens in England, having most likely been collected near Canton by Sir George Staunton, a member of Lord Macartney's embassy to China, in 1792. It may very well be identical to the rose brought to England in 1751 by Osbeck. James Colville propagated and sold it under the name of 'Pale China Rose' and later it acquired the name 'Old Blush'. It made its way to France in 1798 as well, to become the focus of successful breeding efforts and a source of many hybrids to come. By 1800, it had also appeared in North America and would eventually give rise to a wide array of popular descendents, including Noisette roses, Tea roses, Hybrid Teas, and Hybrid Perpetuals.



'Hume's Blush Tea-Scented China'

Photo from La Roseraie du Desért
<http://frenchtearose.com/en/roses/humesBlush.html>

Number Two: 'Parsons' Pink China'

It is generally accepted that the pink China rose which transformed the world's roses came to Europe via Sweden in 1752. The first mention in England comes in 1771 when William Malcolm included in his nursery list 'Evergreen Chine' and 'a new Chine'. Seven years later he added a botanical name for the first one, *Rosa indica*, Indica in this context in fact meaning China. The names Indica and Bengal, long used in Europe to denote new roses from the east, serve as reminders of the vital intermediate role played by the staff of the Botanic Gardens in Calcutta in this formative period of rose history, in providing skilled care for plants brought to them, in transit so to speak, from China and elsewhere. The first mention of 'Parsons' Pink China' in England occurs in 1793, when it was being grown at Rickmansworth, in the garden of Mr Parsons, of course. Such was its impact that by 1823 it was said to be "in every cottage

Number Three: Hume's Blush Tea-Scented China was introduced by Sir A. Hume from the "East Indies" (then including China) in 1810. It was originally named *R. indica odorata* and later *R. indica fragrans*. Hurst estimated that its Tea Rose characteristics predominate by a 2:1 margin over those of its *R. chinensis* parentage. It is known for its large, elegant, pale pink flowers that continually bloom. It is said to have survived arduous conditions upon importation, with only 1 in 1,000 plants surviving first the voyage from China, exposed on the ship's open deck, and then an English blockade of French ports during the Napoleonic Wars.

Number Four: 'Parks' Yellow Tea-Scented China' was brought to the Royal Horticultural Society in 1824, having probably arrived from China in 1823. John Reeves (1774-1856), chief inspector for the East India Company at Canton from 1812 to 1831, was most likely responsible for this import and played a vital role in the introduction of many Chinese plants into Europe at that time. It was given the name *R. indica sulphurea* in France, where it was quickly introduced. Like Hume's China rose, it was more heavily influenced by the Tea rose parent, featuring large yellow flowers with thick tea-scented petals and bright green leaves. It was an important ancestor to many yellow Tea roses of the 1800s.



'Parks' Yellow Tea-Scented China'

Photo from A Picture of Roses website at <http://www.apictureofroses.com/>

The French, as mentioned above, were considered the most proficient rose breeders of the time, having established their preeminence in the early 1700s. The famed botanist, Claude-Antoine Thory (1759-1827) and the renowned artist Pierre-Joseph Redouté (1759-1840) combined to develop and promote many of the most popular China rose hybrids. The Empress Josephine, a passionate lover of roses, was the overriding impetus and beneficiary of their efforts to develop new varieties, which appeared in great numbers at her estate, Malmaison. Many of these were to become progenitors of countless hybrids developed over the next two centuries.

Editor's Note: The second half of the History of China Roses will appear in the November newsletter. The influences and benefits of the China roses will be covered as well as the mysteries surrounding these roses.