This is the first of a multi-part series on the history of roses. First things first - Species roses are the foundation upon which all other roses were created.

Part One B will appear next, with a listing and description of the specific Species roses. Then Part Two - Old Garden Roses, and we will create a timeline showing how these Species roses were hybridized into Albas, Bourbons, Gallicas, etc.

**Species Roses**

These are the very first roses, also known as wild roses, as found in nature, predating humans by thousands of millennia, with simple flowers and the kind of inherent ruggedness that makes them thrive where no other plant will grow. They bloom annually, usually in the Spring, have thorny stems, and all but one of them have only five petals. All roses have five sepals. They carry their hips into the winter, providing food for birds and winter color.

Rose species are endemic only to the Northern Hemisphere of the planet Earth, and no one knows why. Fossil evidence in Asia dates back some 70 million years, and North American fossils from 35 million years ago (the Oligocene epoch) tell us that some rose species did exist at that time. The fossil specimens found near Canyon City, Colorado, most closely resemble the existing species, R. nutkana, and R. palustris (the Swamp Rose). There is no way, of course, of knowing if either of these species actually survived through 35 million years to exist today...

My wife Sandra and I saw some Minoan Frescoes on the island of Crete at the palace of King Knossos, dating back to circa 1700 BC, illustrating a rose with single, five-petaled pink blooms. In Mesopotamia, there have been discoveries of Cuneiform tablets which repeatedly use the word, "amurdinну", which is thought to mean 'bramble', or 'wild rose'.

**Rosa Nutkana**

Photo from [http://people.oregonstate.edu/~wilsomar/Species/Ronu.htm](http://people.oregonstate.edu/~wilsomar/Species/Ronu.htm)

**Rosa palustris (Swamp Rose)**

The historical records of the genus *Rosa* are extremely rich, illustrating that many ancient cultures knew and valued these shrubs. Our American Indian tribes gathered rose hips for food (very rich in vitamin C), and rose hip jelly is delicious.

The English archaeologist, William Flinders Petrie (1853-1942), discovered in the tombs of Hawara, Egypt, wreaths made of flowers, among them, roses! The wreaths date to about AD 170, and represent the oldest preserved specimens of a rose species still living. It is believed that the specimens are *Rosa richardii*, also known as *Rosa sancta*.

There is significant disagreement (raging arguments…) over the number of true rose species. Some species are so similar that they could easily be considered variations of a single species, while other species show enough variation that they could easily be considered to be different species. Lists of rose species usually consist of between 100 and 150 with most botanists agreeing that the actual number is probably nearer the lower end of that range.

The actual number of species still in existence is unclear, as a number of the "wild roses" found may only be sub-varieties of a given species. There is also a certain amount of naturally occurring hybridization between species which also tends to obscure the facts. To add to the confusion, roses occasionally develop a 'sport' or a rose cane that has distinctly different properties than the host plant. Genetic drift is also a factor. Genetic drift or allelic drift is the change in the relative frequency in which a gene variant (allele) occurs in a population due to random sampling and chance: The alleles in offspring are a random sample of those in the parents, and chance has a role in determining whether a given individual survives and reproduces.

To go a little deeper, let's start with the scientific classification of roses.

- **Kingdom**: Plantae
- **Division**: Magnoliophyta
- **Class**: Magnoliopsida
- **Order**: Rosales
- **Family**: Rosaceae
- **Genus**: Rosa

The genus *Rosa* is subdivided into four subgenera:

**Hulthemosa** (formerly *Simplicifoliae*, meaning "with single leaves") containing one or two species from southwest Asia, *R. persica* and *R. berberifolia* (syn. *R. persica* var. *berberifolia*) which are the only roses without compound leaves or stipules.

**Hesperrhodos** (from the Greek for "western rose") has two species, both from southwestern North America. These are *R. minutifolia* and *R. stellata*. This group is indigenous to the western coast of North America (California and northwestern Mexico), and contains only two species, *R. stellata* and *R. stellata* mirifica or 'The Sacramento Rose'.
- both of which are lilac-pink in color and singles. They are not particularly good for landscaping except in natural settings where Nature has helped by bringing one or two into the garden.

**Platyrhodon** (from the Greek for "flaky rose", referring to flaky bark) with only one species from east Asia, *R. roxburghii*. A one-species rose group containing *R. roxburghii* ('The Chestnut Rose') and its hybrids. The rose is sometimes used in landscaping for its unusual foliage (small leaflets in groups of 11 - 15) and prickly hips. The single blooms are large and blush pink, although one hybrid (*R. roxburghii normalis*) is white. *R. roxburghii* plena has double flowers, but retains the blush pink coloration.

**Rosa** (the type subgenus) containing all the other roses. This subgenus is subdivided into 11 sections.

**Banksianae** - white and yellow roses from China. Members of this group are vigorous climbers, growing easily to 20 ft. What makes them good to use in landscaping is their relative lack of prickles. Although flowers - usually white or yellow - are small, they form large clusters. The group is distinctive in that it contains only four Species roses, originally named after the wife of Sir Joseph Banks, Curator for The Royal Botanic Gardens in Kew around 1807. Although their origin is from China, they were introduced to the West from 1807 to 1870. The most popular are *R. banksia* alba plena ('White Lady Banksia') and *R. banksia* lutea ('Yellow Lady Banksia'). As a piece of rose trivia, the largest rose in the world is a 'Yellow Lady Banks rose' which covers some 8000 sq. ft. It's growing in Tombstone, Arizona.

**Bracteatae** - three species, two from China and one from India. This group contains *R. bracteata* or 'The Macartney Rose', introduced from China in 1793. It is a huge rose, growing easily 30 ft. in all directions, and characterized by very hooked prickles that proliferate up the stem. The species was allowed to naturalize in North America during the mid-18th century, and has been considered a native rose since that time. It's most popular hybrid is 'Mermaid'. Mermaid has thorns like fishhooks and could be used as living razor wire. It has beautiful, fragrant flowers and is hardy to zone 4.

**Caninae** - pink and white species from Asia, Europe and North Africa. So named because their hooked prickles reportedly resembled the teeth of canines, these roses are native to Europe, northern Africa and western Asia.
Foliage tends to be medium in size and contains seven to nine leaflets. Blooms are formed in small clusters and the subsequent hips are large and oval. Growth habit is varied from erect to arching, from 2 - 12 ft. Many of the Dog Roses found in the wild today are the suckering remnants of dead hybrid roses which were grafted onto R. canina root stocks several decades ago. In some locations, they are considered a pest weed. Modern rose garden groups are the Sweetbriars, Dog Rose and Albas.

**Carolinae** - white, pink, and bright pink species all from North America. Named after the Carolinas in the United States, these roses are native to the U.S and Canada. In all, there are seven species within this group; growth is short, by rose standards, but upright. The very hooked prickles which proliferate on the stems are frequently paired. Leaves are composed of 7 - 9 leaflets and produce a beautiful autumnal display. For the most part, these roses have no popular gardening hybrids, but are frequently seen in native landscapes.

**Chinensis** - white, pink, yellow, red and mixed-color roses from China and Burma. Although somewhat tender, this rose grouping single-handedly set modern rosedom on its nose! It is from this group that all red roses and all repeat-blooming roses have descended. Growth of these roses varies in all forms; however, they are usually upright in growth pattern and range in size from 3 - 10 ft. Leaflets vary from five to seven per leaf, flowers form in small clusters, and hips are round. Colors range from all the rose shades - pink, white, purple and red. The two primary roses in the Species group are Rosa chinensis or 'China Rose' and R. gigantea. Also, included in this group are R. x. borboniana the progenitor of the Bourbons and R. ornata. One rose, 'The Green Rose' (R. viridiflora) is a popular curiosity grown by many floral suppliers and rosarians interested in a "conversation piece". Modern rose groupings are the Bourbons, Chinas, Hybrid Perpetuals, Noisettes, Teas, Hybrid Teas and Climbing Hybrid Teas.

**Cinnamomeae** - white, pink, lilac, mulberry and red roses from everywhere but North Africa. This very large group is native to North America, eastern Europe and Asia. Interestingly, species native to North America and Europe are pink while the species native to Asia are purple, red and white. Their size varies from 3 - 12 ft. growing erect for the most part. The fall display of hips is the most notable characteristic of this group. For the most part, these roses are non-remontant (nonrepeat blooming). A few of their hybrids do repeat bloom, however. Modern garden groups are the Rugosas, Kordesii and Moyesii, the latter of which is most noted for its flagon-shaped hips - some as large as your thumb. Of interest to us in this group are two native roses, R. Nutkana and R. gymnocarpa, the popular freeway rugosas and local favorite, R. glauca - R. rubrifolia.

**Gallicanae** - pink to crimson and striped roses from western Asia and Europe. Sometimes called the French Roses, this group was actually native to most of Europe and modern day Turkey and Iraq. Arguably, Gallicas have had the most influence on the evolution of modern roses and are noted for their scent and multiple petals. They commonly grow from 3 - 6 ft. and their landscape form varies from erect to grandly arching. Foliage is composed of five leaflets, as are most of our modern roses. Blooms are multi-petaled and form either singly or in groups of threes or fours on comparatively long stems. Although most of the early roses are once-blooming, some of the hybrids and modern descendants are repeat-blooming. Popular landscape roses include R. gallica officinalis ('The Apothecary's Rose' or the red rose of Lancaster in the War of the Roses) because of its historical significance as a rose that retained its scent over a long period and was highly valued by early European apothecaries. R. x. damascena

**Rosa gallica officinalis ‘The Apothecary’s Rose’**
*Photo from [http://www.roguevalleyroses.com/home.php](http://www.roguevalleyroses.com/home.php)*

**Gallicanae** - pink to crimson and striped roses from western Asia and Europe. Sometimes called the French Roses, this group was actually native to most of Europe and modern day Turkey and Iraq. Arguably, Gallicas have had the most influence on the evolution of modern roses and are noted for their scent and multiple petals. They commonly grow from 3 - 6 ft. and their landscape form varies from erect to grandly arching. Foliage is composed of five leaflets, as are most of our modern roses. Blooms are multi-petaled and form either singly or in groups of threes or fours on comparatively long stems. Although most of the early roses are once-blooming, some of the hybrids and modern descendants are repeat-blooming. Popular landscape roses include R. gallica officinalis ('The Apothecary's Rose' or the red rose of Lancaster in the War of the Roses) because of its historical significance as a rose that retained its scent over a long period and was highly valued by early European apothecaries. R. x. damascena
bifera ('Autumn Damask' or 'Quatre Saisons' - French for four seasons) is still popular today and was reportedly the first remontant rose to be introduced to Europeans. Modern rose garden groupings in Gallicanae are the Gallicas, Centifolias, Mosses, Damasks and Portlands.

**Gymnocarpe** - a small group distinguished by a deciduous receptacle on the hip; one species in western North America (R. gymnocarpa), the others in east Asia. Also called the bald-hip rose. A short plant, it has teeny tiny pink flowers in spring and equally tiny red hips in fall and winter. Shade tolerant, it grows in woodsy areas; in fact it doesn’t like full sun. It is not recommended that one eat the hips because they are hairy inside.

**Laevigatae** - a single white species from China. This grouping is composed of only one Species rose and some of its hybrid offspring. So named for its smooth foliage, R. laevigata or 'Cherokee Rose' was originally discovered off the east coast of China in 1759, but later introduced to North America and allowed to naturalize. Blooms are white, large and borne singly on stems with very large, hooked prickles. If left to its own desires, this rose will easily grow to 20 ft. and spread to form a dense thicket. Near the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century, hybrids of this rose were created to add color to the bloom. These include 'Anemone Rose' (a pink), 'Cooper's Burmese' (a creamy white) and 'Red Cherokee' (a light red).

![R. laevigata or 'Cherokee Rose'](http://www.antiqueroseemporium.com/rose-103.html)

**Pimpinellifoliae** - white, pink, bright yellow, mauve and striped roses from Asia and Europe. So called because their foliage is reminiscent of the pimpinella or salad burnet, this group is native to central Europe and northern Asia. There are at least 12 species in this group, and it is from Pimpinellifoliae that we have most of our yellow roses. Several creams, pinks, and whites can also be found, however. As a group, their growth varies in height from 3 - 12 ft. (1 - 4 m), and their blooms are single, profuse and born on short, very prickly stems. Usually, these roses are once-blooming, although some hybrids can produce a second flush where growing seasons are long. Popular landscape roses include R. foetida and R. f. persiana ('Austrian Yellow') because it is reportedly from these roses that all of our modern yellow roses came; and R. foetida bicolor ('Austrian Copper') because of its dazzling copper-orange blooms. The latter sometimes reverts to its yellow parent, and both yellow and copper blooms can be found on the same shrub. (These roses are real blackspot magnets!) Another rose in this group worth mentioning is R. omeiensis, the only four-petaled rose. Modern rose groupings are the Austrian Briars, Burnet and Scotch Roses.

**Synstylae** - white, pink, and crimson roses from all areas. This group got its name from the Greek for "fused pillars" - an apparent reference to the way the styles are formed at the center of the flower. The style is the slender part of the pistil in the center of a bloom. The species belonging to this group are chiefly from Asia, although native specimens can also be found throughout Europe and portions of eastern North America. The group is noted for its vigorous climbers, multitude of blooms and robust growth habits. The most popular specimens for this group are R. moschata ('The Musk Rose') for its historical significance as well as its fragrance, and R. multiflora for its vigorous climbing ability and floriferous bloom. In central and eastern portions of the United States, however, the latter is considered a pest weed. (and a harbor for Rose Rosette Disease.) The real significance of this group is that they are the progenitors of our modern garden groups of Musks and Hybrid Musks, Modern Shrubs, Polyanthas, Floribundas and modern Climbing and rambling roses.
Thanks to Mark Whitelaw, ARS Consulting Rosarian, for his excellent article on rose sub-genera.

**Fragrance Footnote:** The fragrance of *Rosa moschata* has a two-part profile of spice/clove (the "musk" element coming from the stamens, especially in a young bloom) and rich, sweet, and not quite fruity but something akin to banana that comes from the petals. It is unforgettable!