Marie-Joséphe Rose Tascher de la Pagerie, later to become Empress Joséphine of France, was born on the French Island of Martinique at her family’s sugar plantation in 1763. (She was known as 'Rose' until General Bonaparte began calling her 'Joséphine'.)

At 14 she was sent home to France to marry the young Vicomte Alexandre de Beauharnais, a most unpleasant young man who was somewhat less than enchanted with his arranged bride.

But the Revolution intervened and Alexandre went to the guillotine. Rose would have followed him but for the fact that the Reign of Terror ceased and she was one of the first condemned 'Aristo' prisoners to be released. Soon after, she met the young (and considered unpromising) soldier, Napoleon Bonaparte. Napoleon was thin, unkempt, a snob and wildly ambitious. He was also looking for a wife who would advance him socially and militarily. He soon realized that slender, graceful Joséphine had the right connections. Later he wrote in his memoirs that he was struck by “her extraordinary grace and irresistibly sweet manner”.

Joséphine and Malmaison
by Jerry Haynes
Joséphine bought the manor house Malmaison in April 1799 for herself and her husband, General Napoléon Bonaparte, the future Napoléon I of France, who was away at that time, fighting the Egyptian Campaign. Malmaison was a run-down estate, (a former Leper colony) eight miles west of central Paris that encompassed nearly 150 acres of woods and meadows.

Upon his return, Bonaparte expressed fury at Joséphine for purchasing such an expensive house with the money she had expected him to bring back from the Egyptian campaign. The house, for which she had paid well over 300,000 francs, needed extensive renovations, and she spent a huge fortune doing so. Malmaison however, would bring great happiness to the Bonaparte's.

Joséphine endeavored to transform the large estate into "the most beautiful and curious garden in Europe, a model of good cultivation". She actively sought out flora and fauna along with rare and exotic animals from around the world. Joséphine wrote: "I wish that Malmaison may soon become the source of riches for all of France"... Napoleon was a keen naturalist who responded to the beauty of Malmaison, announcing that, in the open air, his ideas were "loftier and larger". He added 5,000 acres to the estate, built stables and even turned a blind eye when Joséphine broke the law by asking that English seeds and plants be brought to her from captured ships. Her informal plantings had already been christened "jardins à l’anglaise", (English Gardens) and her greenhouses, designed by Pierre Joseph Redouté, were modeled on those at Kew Gardens near London. Her large greenhouses were heated by 45 coal-burning stoves to protect tender plants during the harsh French winters.

In the gardens at Malmaison Joséphine had begun to grow every known species of plant. She had already introduced the camellia, phlox and jasmine to France. Now, for her gardens at Malmaison, huge sums were spent and, no matter how much money she had, Joséphine managed always to be in debt. Tulips were ordered from Holland, lilies from the Nile. She especially
loved her namesake, the rose, and invested heavily in its cultivation. It was a small, even unimpressive, flower when she began acquiring every variety that existed, and the modern, perpetually flowering rose can be said to be her creation indirectly because she focused so much attention on roses, which hybridizers vied to create for her. Joséphine’s roses were eventually developed into the hybrid tea varieties so familiar to us today. Her most famous commission—a series of watercolors, Les Roses by Redouté—would sadly be published only after her death.

Even during the war with England, when the continent was under blockade, Joséphine continued to buy huge quantities of plants from a London nurseryman and went so far as to obtain a passport for him so that he could travel back and forth with her acquisitions.

In her years as Empress, Joséphine grew, for the first time in France, 200 new plants, flowers and trees. She introduced tree peonies, dahlias, a purple-flowered magnolia, pelargoniums and many more varieties. She hoped to create botanical gardens all over France along the lines of her gardens in Malmaison and kept up correspondences on the subject of her seed and plant collections. Australia had recently been discovered by Captain Cook and many new species were sent to her—often from captured British ships. Joséphine was very fond of swans and imported black swans from Australia, even using swan design motifs for her furniture and rugs.
During the Regency, the French and most importantly, the Empress Joséphine had a significant impact on the development of the concept of a rose garden.

The Empress Joséphine collected 260 roses for her gardens at the Chateau de la Malmaison from 1805 to 1810. This collection gave the French an interest in the culture of roses in the vicinity of Paris that led to some of the most important work in rose hybridization during the early years of the 19th century. Joséphine bought from, or employed all of the rock stars of roses of that period.

The French writer, Auguste De Pronville, stated that in 1814, there were only about 182 varieties of roses, but by mid-century, due to the keen interest Joséphine had created in the rose and hybridization, there were 6,000 varieties--most created by cross-pollination and the resultant seed production. The head gardener of the Empress Joséphine was a Frenchman named André Dupont and he, along with André de Vilmorin and Jacques-Louis Descement were among the earliest cultivators of roses from seed.

The Empress Joséphine had over 150 different Gallica cultivars in her collection, and as you may well guess, the Gallica rose was the 'darling' of the Regency period.

The Empress Joséphine's goal for Malmaison was to obtain every species of rose then known. Napoleon instructed the French Navy to seize any plants or rose seeds they found when they searched ships at sea. In just one year, Joséphine spent close to 2,600 pounds with the English nursery of Kennedy and Lee, despite the war with Britain. Despite the naval blockade, the British Admiralty granted a safe-conduct pass to the Kennedy and Lee firm to deliver the new China Roses to Malmaison. The Englishman John Kennedy was employed by the Empress to assist her in laying out her rose garden and interestingly enough, there was one plan (never used) that laid out a rose garden in a design close to the Union Jack.

Joséphine set the standard for rose gardening for a very long time. All the wealthy French followed her lead and many joined in the competition to see who could amass the largest collection. Her influence was felt across the Channel, in England, as well. The English, anxious to keep up with social fashion and French culture, made concerted efforts to collect roses, just like the French.

Her biggest rivals were the Countess of Bougainville and the Marquis of Blanchford, who also tried to amass as many new roses as possible. It is no
surprise that economically, the rose became the most important flower in both France and England and the impact was felt in the colonies as well.

After her death in 1814 from a chill acquired while walking with Czar Alexander in her garden, Malmaison quickly fell into neglect, but the gardeners who helped create Malmaison went to other positions throughout France and established gardens and nurseries which still have an impact on the rose industry today. During Joséphine's residence at Malmaison, she hired André Dupont, longtime director of the Luxemburg Garden before ending his career as head gardener at Malmaison. Dupont was one of the first gardeners to produce roses from seeds. With his help, Josephine amassed nearly 260 rose species and cultivars. Dupont passed on this legacy to Alexandre Hardy, who took over the Luxemburg Garden and raised many roses we still grow today, including 'Mme. Hardy' and 'Safrano'. Hardy took on a young assistant at the Luxembourg Garden, Jacques-Julien Margottin, who also founded his own rose nursery. He and his son Jules kept alive Joséphine's dream and continued to grow and hybridize roses.

The famous French rose hybridizer, Jean-Pierre Vibert was born on January 31, 1777, in Paris, France. He was age 12 when the Bastille fell, 15 when Louis XVI was guillotined, 17 during the Reign of Terror. Perhaps he was eye-witness to some or all of these events! One certain thing is that he was an ardent supporter of Napoléon and joined Napoléon's First Army of the Republic; and, as a result of his wounds sustained at the Siege of Naples, returned to Paris, where he set up as a hardware shop owner. His shop was near where André Dupont, one of the Empress Joséphine's favored rose suppliers and gardeners, had his rosarium. This proximity fostered Vibert's interest in roses and rose-breeding. The Napoleonic Wars ended with the British troops over-running Paris. Jacques-Louis Descemet, perhaps the earliest European practitioner of controlled cross-breeding in roses, had to flee the country for political reasons. Vibert bought out what remained of Descemet's premises and properties, including, in particular, remnants of his breeding-notes, and his roses—both the nursery stock and his seedling new cultivars. When the allied armies entered Paris in 1815, Descemet's garden contained 10,000 seedling roses which Jean-Pierre Vibert succeeded in saving and carrying to his garden on the Marne in the countryside of France. Vibert went on to become one of the most important and influential rose hybridizers of all time.

There were also two very famous English nurserymen who specialized in roses, and provided roses to Joséphine, Thomas Rivers and William Paul. Rivers wrote: Rivers's Rose Amateur's Guide in 1837, which lists current varieties and cultivation methods. Paul's book The Rose Garden was written in 1848 which included a rather pompous essay about the rose
in Art, as well as how to cultivate the rose. He describes 87 Damask, 76 Provence (Centifolia), 84 Moss and 471 French (Gallica) roses.

Joséphine's gardens at Malmaison were probably the most important factor in establishing the popularity of the rose in the 19th century. Part of Joséphine's efforts at Malmaison included commissioning the painter, Pierre-Joseph Redouté to paint the roses in her collection. He had been the court painter to Queen Marie-Antoinette, but despite the revolution, he managed to survive and become the court rose painter.

Redouté's work, *Les Roses*, was completed after Joséphine's death and the three volumes, issued between 1817 and 1824 are some of the most beautiful and important books ever published on roses.

Botanist Claude-Antoine Thory provided the commentary for the book and these volumes became the standard reference work on roses for quite some time. It is still used as a reference work to identify older varieties of roses. Thory made the first serious attempt to untangle the genealogy of roses.

Much of his work has proven to be accurate and still stands up today.

Many of the 170 roses illustrated by Redouté are still grown in gardens today. Many consider his painting of 'Blush Noisette' to be the all-time masterpiece of botanical illustration.

Even after the exile and death of Napoleon, Redouté continued to paint for Louise-Philippe, the new Bourbon king, in 1830. Redouté died in 1840 at 81 years old. He was painting a lily at the time.
The rose named 'Souvenir de la Malmaison' was introduced in 1843 by French hybridizer Jean Béluze. The name means 'A remembrance of Malmaison.' Even though this Bourbon rose was introduced long after Josephine's death, it stands as a reminder of a moment in time when Malmaison was the glittering epicenter of the rose universe.