This month’s featured rose is an Old Garden Rose, an old heirloom China rose and one that is sure to be a conversation piece in the garden. Perhaps the oddest rose in existence, it is classified as a Hybrid China and is appropriately known as ‘The Green Rose’. A few pale green varieties of roses do exist, but none match the distinctiveness of the incomparable "China" green rose. Green hued roses have historically represented fertility, growth and nature’s abundance. They also represented bounty, goodwill, success in business and romantic relationships and even jealousy. However, no other green hued rose has ever matched the uniqueness and interest of ‘The Green Rose’.

Originally known as ‘Rosa chinesis viridiflora’, ‘The Green Rose’ is a “love it or hate it” kind of a rose whose uniqueness stems from its lack of true petals. Whether or not you love it, this plant arouses genuine interest in people because it is uncommon, a novelty. The ‘flowers’ of ‘The Green Rose’ are in fact a genetic anomaly, and that is presumed to be the key to this plant’s existence. In this case, the ‘flower’ consists of the sepals and a leafy middle.

For those unfamiliar with “sepals”, if you cut any rose flower in your garden and flip it upside down, those pointy green “leaves” just below the bloom are the sepals. Every rose has them. In this case, basically, the petals (corolla), androecium (male portion) and gynoecium (female portion) have become vegetative. This results in a green mutation of a flower on a most unusual looking rose that arouses much interest and is highly sought after.

‘The Green Rose’ presents small blooms with a rosette type form of between an inch and an inch and a half across or about the size of golf balls, and they are made up entirely of deep green sepals. These “flowers” begin as rose shaped buds before they unfurl into little mounds consisting of sharp, serrated leafy petals like tiny spiky leaves. The petals are many narrowly shaped, reminiscent of little spear tips. When in full
bloom, the petals open to display a three dimensional circle of narrow flat, sharply pointed spears that burst up and out, as if reaching for the sun or an unexpected touch.

The blooms begin as a dark blue green, particularly the fall, and often take on a bronze cast as they mature. Since the American Rose Society has no classification for a green rose, they have classified the color of ‘The Green Rose’ as “white, near white or white blend”.

By way of background, this rose has a rather interesting and somewhat exotic history. It is believed that it originated in China and is actually seen in some old Chinese paintings. History notes that ‘The Green Rose’ was the sole property of the emperors of China, and it was forbidden for anyone outside of the Forbidden City to grow this rose.

Many believe this rose evolved from ‘Slater’s Crimson China’, although others claim it is a sport from ‘Parson’s Pink China’. According to most rose historians, ‘The Green Rose’ first made its appearance as early as 1743, although it did not actually start to attract attention in England and the United States until the mid 1800’s.

A gentleman named John Smith notes having discovered this rose growing in the United States circa 1827. The first documented times ‘The Green Rose’ was offered for sale appear to be in 1849 in the inventory of a Philadelphia nursery owned by a man named Robert Buist, in 1854 from Thomas Affleck of Mississippi, in 1855 in France by Guillot/Roseraies Pierre Guillot, and in 1856 through a company called Bembridge & Harrison in the United Kingdom. Mr. Buist reported that he first acquired cuttings of ‘The Green Rose’ in Charleston back in 1833, and the rose had apparently had been growing here and there as a curiosity in the Southern states of North Carolina, Mississippi and Louisiana during that time period.

Modern Roses 12 documents that ‘The Green Rose’ was introduced before 1856 since there is at least agreement that the above-referenced English nursery named Bambridge & Harrison listed it for sale in 1856 or 1855. There is however plenty of evidence that it was known and passed around in the U.S. in or about Charleston as early as 1833, probably as a sport of ‘Parson’s Pink China’. Since those reports cannot be verified with accuracy, the listing simply settles on before 1856. As such, the likelihood is that it was introduced into commerce well before 1856 and in the U.S.
‘The Green Rose’ made a rather inauspicious debut at the Paris Exposition Universelle in 1856, when it was called by one nurseryman, “a little monstrosity or an error of nature”. A reporter from London’s Gardeners’ Chronical and Agricultural Gazette joked that “a green-eyed monster like this is not inviting.” Furthermore, Jack Harkness referred to it in a famous quote as an “engaging monstrosity” and says in his book “Roses” that it is “…very easy to grow, the small space occupied is well paid by the amusement afforded.” In spite of these early disparaging remarks, ‘The Green Rose’ somehow caught the fancy of the general public and flourished, gaining many admirers in the years to come.

This rose presents a number of very rewarding aspects, not the least of which is that it is almost always in bloom, and the blooms appear to last forever, both on the bush and as cut flowers. Of course, the actual blooms may be a little difficult to detect, since the flowers disappear visually into the foliage. The soft grassy green color of the blooms closely matches that of the foliage around it, it is as if they are hiding from the anticipation of being discovered. However, once you know what to look for, you will find the bush is literally covered in the little green florets. It is a definite eye catcher, and you will grow used to garden visitors exclaiming time and again, “Is that really a rose?????”

‘The Green Rose’ has an upright growth habit and reaches from two to five and a half feet tall and about three feet wide, although some plants in the ground have spread out further. The apple green blooms are borne in small to medium clusters on long green canes with brown hooked prickles. The leaves are long and thin with sharp points. The florets have a slight but pronounced peppery, spicy fragrance that is particularly predominant when the sepals are rubbed. It is relatively disease resistant but does get a bit of powdery mildew from time to time, so benefits from occasional spraying. It is also shade tolerant and would do quite well in that area of your garden that only receives partial sun.

Another unique quality about this special rose is that it is what is known as “asexual”. It does not make pollen or set hips, since the blooms have no stamens or stigmas and are therefore quite sterile. As such, this rose cannot be used in hybridizing. It has, however, managed to survive for centuries without any assistance from man.

Of interest, in recent years a sport of ‘The Green Rose’ was discovered by the late, great Ralph Moore, and it was felt it was a reversion back to the original rose. He called it the ’Rosa chi-
nensis viridiflora reversion'. Rosarian/hybridizer Paul Barden grows a plant of it today, which was a gift from Ralph Moore in 1999. He notes that the blooms are sometimes pink as you see in the photo attached to this story, and sometimes they are a much deeper Chinese red hue. No experimentation has been done for breeding purposes, although it has been known to set seed hips. It is considered to be more of an historical curiosity more than a “pretty” rose for the garden.

My friend Bob Martin and PRS member notes the following in this regard: San Diego exhibitor Dick Streeper claims to have raised a seedling from a seed pod discovered on ‘The Green Rose’, a seedling he exhibited at the San Ramon National. It was indistinguishable from ‘The Green Rose’. Add this report to the report that Ralph Moore has a reversion and my guess is that once in a blue moon (green moon?) the rose might actually revert and produce a seed pod. Hard to say though since logic would say that if it reverted to ‘Parson’s Pink China’, you ought to get something from the seed other than another ‘The Green Rose’.

A great rose for exhibitors, ‘The Green Rose’ appears regularly on trophy tables in the Dowager Queen class and in challenge classes or collections. See the photo of the most recent Dowager Queen winner at the Fall National Convention shown by Bob & Kitty Belendez. The great rose statistician and exhibitor, Bob Martin reports that ‘The Green Rose’ is the top winner of the Dowager class over the last three years and is usually at or near the top. Arrangers also use it effectively and it makes attractive filler for a bouquet of OGRs in the classes that call for a collection of OGRs. It lasts a long time as a cut bloom and can be groomed with a cosmetic brush - sort of like combing it out to improve the symmetry of the petals. The bronze stamens can also be pulled with tweezers since they are a sign of age.

Also perfect for floral arrangements or dried in bouquets, this rose lends its unique texture and contrasting color of green and bronze to these creations. It is generally acknowledged that no arrangement of cut flowers is regarded as perfect unless some green is prominent among the brighter colors. As such, ‘The Green Rose’ with its beautifully arranged sepal-petals, works exquisitely in certain cases. See the photos attached to this article of two trophy winning entries of top exhibitor Kitty Belendez, who successfully creates eye-catching bouquets of shrub roses such as ‘Symphony’ combined with ‘The Green Rose’. This unusual rose is becoming one of the essentials of the cut flower trade among French florists and is being grown to some extent by florists in this country.

In conclusion, this rose offers much for both the exhibitor and the home gardener. In looking at ‘The Green Rose’, we are seeing a blossom that we know is essentially the very same as what someone a century or two ago gazed upon; and as such, we can feel a sense of identity with rose lovers of the past. This rose will be a talking point in your garden, as lovers of the curious in nature visit. You will be able to share something rare and beautiful in your garden that is a part of rose history. As noted above, ‘The Green Rose’ can be used for cut flower, exhibition or garden, and it should therefore be cherished as a “rose treasure”. It is presently available commercially and can be obtained from the Antique Rose Emporium, among other nurseries. I highly recommend you consider adding one or more plants to your garden.