By throwing our money at cut flower favorites, we’ve gotten exactly what we’ve asked for, scentless roses.

Further support for the premise that scent is more lacking today comes from Norman Young’s *Complete Rosarian*. His chapter on scent relates that hybrid teas grown prior to 1945 had a higher percentage of varieties described as scented than those grown after 1945, based on his 1971 survey of eleven grower’s lists. He places the “blame” for the reduction in scented varieties squarely on the consuming public.

“If the ordinary amateur rose grower refused to buy scentless roses, they would not be put on the market. The breeder has no control over the scent of his roses; the factors which govern its appearance in new hybrids are quite unknown. So long as he knows that his best roses are still eligible for the highest show awards, even though they may have no scent at all, we can hardly expect him to discard some of his finest seedlings and perhaps rob himself of a gold medal, however much he himself may regret their lack of scent. After all, he has a living to make; he is not a professional philanthropist. But, it is one thing to recognise the present trend, and quite another to arrest and reverse it.” (Pages 132-133.)

Edward LeGrice states in *Rose Growing Complete* that, at least in England, the number of scented varieties is increasing, in no small part due to the Royal National Rose Society making it nearly impossible to obtain the coveted Gold Medal for a scentless hybrid tea.

Jack Harkness’ wonderful book, *Roses*, has a very interesting discussion on the chemistry of fragrance. He explains that the alcohols and sugars which make up fragrance are stored under the inner side of the petal surfaces in “nipples” called papillae. The cuticle or petal skins must be chemically active and elastic enough to permit the storage and release of these substances. Cut flowers need thick, tough petal skins which won’t bruise, rot, nor be “heated with alcohol. Such petals are unlikely to contain any perfume at all.”

Florists and exhibitors have very similar requirements. They both need stiff, durable petals of heavy substance, able to withstand refrigeration, storage and travel. If that weren’t enough, they then have to withstand handling and remain looking great while being judged or presented as gifts. It’s because of this waxy petal skin which gives these roses their “heavy substance” that they aren’t chemically active and therefore, in most cases, have very little scent.

To take this a step further, exhibition quality in roses is one of the most highly-stressed criteria in ARS testing and ratings. So the roses with the thickest, strongest petals and the least perfume, tend to receive the highest ratings. The catalog writers hype this “heavy petal substance” as a cue to the exhibitors, and the public misinterprets the ratings and hype as gauges to their general enjoyment.

Regarding fragrance descriptions in rose catalogues, we have far too many errors in retail as well as official ARS registration descriptions. The ‘Tropicana’ hybrid tea rose is still catalogued as having a “heavy raspberry fragrance”; ‘Brandy’ as having a “strong, spicy tea fragrance”; while ‘Sterling Silver’ only merits a “slightly fragrant”. *Modern Roses* 10 presents ‘Abracadabra’ as “very fragrant”; ‘Barbara Bush’ as possessing a “heavy damask”; ‘Brigadoon’ as “moderate spice”; ‘Glory Days’ as “fragrant”; and, 30 years after its introduction, ‘Tropicana’ as still having a “heavy, fruity fragrance”. These are only a few of the many examples available. This subject has interested me for a long time, and I have informally surveyed a fair number of people over the past few years, and have found no one who has agreed with the fragrance descriptions of any of these “official” reports. Either catalogue writers fail to take their “noses to the roses” or they realize that “smell sells”.

Honestly heavily fragrant modern roses abound. I can think of none more highly fragrant, regardless of the prevailing weather conditions, time of day or even season than ‘Lem-

We vote with our dollars. By throwing our money at cut flower favorites, we’ve gotten exactly what we’ve asked for, scentless roses. I believe it is long past time for us to make fragrance a more important characteristic in ARS Trial Certificates, Gold Medals as well as Roses in Review. Until we make selling fragrant roses more profitable, we have no room to complain.

There is hope, however. It appears that the surviving old garden roses with their moderate to strong scents are most likely the best of the lot. There have been hundreds, even thousands of bourbons, portlands, damasks, hybrid perpetuals, etc., which did not stand the test of time, and many of them had no reference to fragrance in their descriptions. In my opinion, many of these “lost” roses probably didn’t measure up to the survivors in important ways. I believe fragrance was probably one of the most significant. From searching out and collecting old hybrid teas not generally in commerce, I’ve seen that those old favorites still catalogued often represent the best of the breed, many of them scoring well on the fragrance scale.

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