

## The World On My Cart - Reflections on Roses in a Therapeutic Context

by Ann Kent, HTM

In June, I attended the World Rose Convention in Vancouver, BC, and the concurrent World Rose Festival. One day, while listening to a discourse on diseases and viruses, my mind drifted to consider the complexity of rose breeding, the pursuit of perfection in cultivating and showcasing hundreds of species and cultivars, the centuries of colourful and rich botanical history associated with roses, and I asked myself a question.

How could I bring more of this rosarian knowledge, endeavour, and passion to my day-to-day work as a horticultural therapist?

By way of background, my earliest recollection of roses was of the ramblers tumbling over the wall onto the cobbled yard of my grandmother's tiny pub at a country crossroads in East Anglia. A year or so later, my widowed grandmother accepted a proposal of marriage from a local farmer and the next family visit was to a 17C. brick farm house with a large walled garden.

To this day, if I bury my nose in an old-fashioned rose, the fragrance conjures not only the picture of my grandmother's kitchen garden with its beds of old tea roses and ramblers reaching into the lane but also the sounds of bees and horses and cart wheels, the sharp smell of the stable yard and the dairy shed mixed with the honey sweet fragrance of her garden, the dusty scent of fresh cut hay, and the texture of the deep and prickly feather mattress into which I sank at night.

Years later, I tried to recreate a small part of my granny's garden in my deeply shaded and rather soggy Vancouver locale. It did not work. My efforts to grow roses gave way to Japanese maples, rhododendrons, hostas, ferns, and other shade lovers that continue to flourish. Tucked among these are a few straggly rose bushes and one verdant climber. At my sun-drenched allotment garden, I have a hedgerow of robust rugosas and shaggy rose orphans of unknown provenance, all with astonishing fragrance.



*Left: R. rugosa 'Hansa'.  
Photo, Ann Kent*



*Right: Tiny R. 'The Fairy'  
goes to work in a little blue  
pot. Photo, Ann Kent.*

In my practice as a horticultural therapist, I now work primarily with frail elders in residential care who have been diagnosed with dementia and sometimes with people who have suffered from stroke who are moving slowly through a rehabilitation process.

The small group and one-to-one therapeutic sessions typically involve a horticulture or floral activity that varies with the season, but we always open with what one of the residents has cheerfully dubbed, “the smell and tell part”.

The top of my big cart is loaded with tubs of fresh herbs, flowers, and greenery from my garden. Residents are invited to touch, hold, scrunch, and sniff the plant material. Some folk simply hold the plants on their laps or against their cheeks, others pass them hand to hand and ask me eager questions. “What is it?” “Where did it come from?”

Or, while I am tidying up to leave, and in wistful observation of their memory loss, “Please do whatever you did again now, it is beautiful, and I’ve already forgotten...”

Each month, I choose a theme flower: magnolia in April, peony in May, rose in June, and bring in lots of plant samples to foster reminiscence and encourage moments of discovery and learning, just as powerful and important in the lives of frail elders as they are to those of us whose faculties are not impaired by disease or injury.

What I realized, sitting in the lecture hall, was that not only did I want more challenge in my experience and knowledge of roses, but I needed to bring more of that inspiration to my work place: to go far beyond the sensory activities for which I use roses to stimulate cognitive reaction and reminiscence and to tap into the evocative power of rose history and culture.

The next week, I packed a floral bag with my rose convention program and a selection of posters, cards and other rose themed goods acquired there and at the rose festival. Rather than start with the live roses and herbs on my cart, I put the bag on the activity table and told my group where I had been for the past few days. As each piece was lifted from bag to table, it was passed from hand to hand or gently placed on someone’s lap. I ignored the habitual naysayer in the background who said, “Why do you bother? They can’t read.”

Reaction was immediate and extraordinarily verbal. I discovered that many of the elders and staff had been glued to evening TV news coverage of the World Rose Festival and were eager for first hand stories. They were absolutely fascinated by how roses are packaged to travel thousands of miles. Out came the June issue of *The Rose Bed* containing an illustrated article on how roses are prepared for international exhibit.

Sometimes, I take books from my personal library to share with residents but rarely the old and precious ones. That week I ventured taking one of my “new” acquisitions from an antiquarian bookseller at the rose convention to use in my afternoon one-to-one sessions.

I placed the book, full of colour plates of 17C and 18C drawings and paintings of roses and protected by a rose themed tea towel, gently on the lap of a resident who has not spoken in many weeks and who recently has needed assistance to be fed. I guided her hands to unwrap the towel. She stroked the roses on the fabric and gave me a shy smile. Magic. Without further assistance, she opened the book but then stalled. I turned the pages slowly. Suddenly and clearly, and with her care aide looking on in awe, she said, “Are there any drawings where...where...where the...the...” (“illustrator?” I prompted) ...yes, yes...where the illustrator...the illustrator used butterflies?”

The revelation of her knowledge of styling in botanical illustration now changes my sessions with this frail elder. I will still use strong images, the touch of plant material, and the fragrance of seasonal herbs and flowers to open a connection with her but I will also offer far more in the way of opportunities to savour and to learn from beautiful old books.

The next day, I decided to cut and pack the tubs and baskets of plant material for my cart in a completely different way than usual, by place of origin rather than bunched for a sequence of therapeutic activities. I filled one container with plants from Japan and China, another with old world garden flowers from Europe, a third with aromatic Mediterranean herbs, a fourth with samples of plants native to south-coastal BC. To my eye, the cart looked just as cluttered as usual: spikes of astilbe and spiraea towered over hydrangea and rugosa roses; campanula, mullein, campion, snapdragons, and daisies filled a large pottery jug; sage, rosemary, thyme and basil spilled out of a low basket; the native plants were a blur of greens.

My first stop was one of my regulars, a diminutive woman in her mid-nineties who rarely leaves her room and spends much of her day in solitude, propped in a chair with a book on her lap. Like many elders with whom I work, she emigrated to Canada in her youth, kept a garden for providing food rather than enjoyment, and now takes a new found delight in flowers.

I knocked at the open door and greeted her. "Oh, Oh," she exclaimed at the sight of the cart. Then, as I wheeled it to her chair and waited quietly for her to continue, "Oh...you have brought me the world on your cart."

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*A Savoy cabbage from from a facility garden and R. 'Elena' invite reminiscence and literary allusions. Photo, Jennifer Lamb*