





A sweet disorder

Moor Wood, Gloucestershire
Charles Quest-Ritson visits the National Collection of rambling roses, which shows these most romantic of plants at their very finest

Photographs by
Britt Willoughby-Dyer

THE National Collection of Rambler Roses at Moor Wood is a glorious tableau of colour, beauty and scent, worth a long journey to see at the height of its midsummer loveliness. The collection began in 1983 and is still expanding, thanks to the commitment of Henry and Susie Robinson, who put it together and remain faithful to their dream of collecting all known varieties of rambler roses before they are lost to gardens and gardeners. Most were bred between 1890 and 1930; many are rare and some are extinct, at least in Britain. Making the collection is conservation in action.

‘Making the rambler-rose collection is conservation in action’

It all came about in an unusual way. The Robinsons were about to be married and knew that, eventually, they would take over the big house at Moor Wood. They decided that they needed a good theme to resurrect the two-acre garden and adapt it to modern exigencies. This was a time when Plant Heritage, then known as the National Council for the Conservation of Plants and Gardens [NCCPG], was looking for people to establish National Collections (*I lost my heart to a hosta*, July 22, 2015).

The Robinsons' friend Andrew Lyndon-Skeggs showed them a list of the genera for which the NCCPG was hoping to find custodians and the Robinsons realised immediately that rambler roses were a perfect ➤

Ramble on: to the left of the gate is *Rosa Sander's White Rambler* with *R. Wickwar* above and crimson *R. Hiawatha Recurrent*



Above: Prolific pink *Rosa Mrs F. W. Flight* scrambles over the wall. **Facing page:** Framing the window is *R. New Dawn*, a perpetual-flowering sport of *R. Dr W. Van Fleet* introduced in 1930. **Below,** one can see a sucker of *R. multiflora* from the original rootstock

choice for the Cotswold stone of their walled garden, fitting with the wild, rather romantic effect they thought they could create. Ten years later, the 100 different roses they had planted were recognised by the NCCPG as the National Collection of Rambling Roses. Still expanding, it now stretches to more than 150 ramblers—Multifloras, Wichuranas, Ayrshires, Sempervirens hybrids and more.

Mr Robinson farms 1,000 acres of Cotswold brash soil, with a thin and stony layer of clay over the oolitic limestone rock and a pH of about 8. It's not ideal for rose-growing, but rambling roses are vigorous, thrifty growers and usually fare well enough. The garden is at 750ft and too cold for Banksian roses or Cooper's Burmese, even on a south-facing wall; anything that does well at Moor Wood will survive in most parts of Britain.

The Robinsons began by acquiring all the rambling roses available from British nurseries and grouped them around the garden according to colour—'landscaping with roses' is how Mrs Robinson describes it. Next, they started to look for varieties no longer available in Britain, which were still grown in France, Germany and the US. None of the three earliest to flower, usually in the first half of May, was raised in Britain: Gruss an Zabern was bred in Germany, Morletii in France and Dawsoniana in Massachusetts in the US.

Rambler roses are not quite the same as climbing roses. Garden-writer extraordinaire Hugh Johnson explains: 'Climbers are those which tend to produce stiff stems in relatively small numbers (not "breaking" very often from the base): ramblers usually have more pliable and whippy shoots in larger numbers, tending not to grow so long because new ones are regularly coming from ground level to take over.'

‘There is a fine line between chaos and romance’

There is another difference: ramblers have a greater admixture of wild-rose species in their genetic make-up. In their more immediate ancestry, they usually have a species such as *Rosa wichurana* or *R. multiflora*, but climbing roses are more closely related to complex hybrids, including the hybrid teas and Floribundas. Most ramblers flower only once, but there are some repeat-flowerers, such as Aristide Briand and the ever-popular Phyllis Bide.

That said, most ramblers flower on last year's wood. Pruning means taking out, down to ground level, all the wood that has finished flowering. The new growths this encourages are then tied to wire strainers.

The Robinsons do all pruning between the end of June and the end of September, before and after harvest time on the farm. They were fortunate to receive advice in the early years of their garden-making from Graham Stuart Thomas, the great populariser of old roses. He encouraged them not to train their ramblers against the walls, but to take them up to the top and let them hang over—advice that is still the making of the display at Moor Wood today. As the garden is on a slope and the walls are of variable height, most of the roses can be seen and enjoyed without peering up.

Not all the roses here are planted against walls. Many are encouraged to develop as free-standing shrubs, 6ft to 8ft tall, in borders in areas such as the rock garden, originally made by Mr Robinson's grandmother in the 1930s, but now almost wholly given to roses. La Mortola climbs to 40ft up an ash tree and grey-leaved Wickwar billows down the hillside for perhaps as much as 50ft; the latter was a gift from friend Keith Steadman, in whose garden at Wickwar it first appeared as a stray seedling. Another great Gloucestershire rosarian is commemorated by *Rosa Tom Marshall*, introduced by his son Keith, who had a fine rose garden at North Nibley, although the rose itself is no longer available in Britain.

The roses are never sprayed. Mr Robinson says life is too short—fungal diseases may >





Rosa Erinnerung an Brod on the summerhouse, with white *R. Gruß an Zabern* and large-flowered yellow-ish *R. Emily Grey* to the right

be unsightly, but they don't appear until after most ramblers have flowered and, in any case, they never do any damage to the plant itself. The only feeding the ramblers receive is half a barrowload of horse manure in winter. This acts as a slow-release fertiliser and helps to suppress the disease spores from the previous year. 'We are not immaculate gardeners,' says Mr Robinson. 'We have a policy of benign neglect and there is a fine dividing line between chaos and romantic disorder.'

This is the modern way to manage a large garden and the reasons are clear: the garden has to fit in with family commitments and the

demands of a busy life in the community. Mr Robinson sits on many committees and is a past president of the CLA. His grandparents employed four gardeners and his parents had two. Few of us can afford those historic levels of staffing. These days, a local Polish lady called Kasia comes to help at Moor Wood once a fortnight and the redoubtable Keith Rogers does the mowing and strimming. All the rest of the weeding, pruning and training of the roses the Robinsons do themselves, whenever they can find the time.

Everything is geared up to the annual open day, (hopefully) the last Sunday in June, in aid

of the National Garden Scheme. Yes, there will always be weeds but, believes Mr Robinson, 'there are two ways to see ramblers. Either you study them close up and think about the immense variation in colour, shape and scent. Or you stand back, half-close your eyes and see blurry, colourful shapes, like an Impressionist painting'. That is a modest man's underestimate of one of midsummer's most beautiful and romantic gardens in England. 🐦

Moor Wood, Gloucestershire (01285 831692; www.moorwoodroses.co.uk)

Charles Quest-Ritson wrote the 'RHS Encyclopedia of Roses'

Some of Henry Robinson's favourite rambling roses

Janet B. Wood, a vigorous, thrifty, once-flowering foundling, whose original name is lost, this Ayrshire rose has many clusters of small, pure-white, strongly musk-scented flowers in summer

Wickwar is vigorous and has luscious grey foliage and substantial, musk-scented, creamy-white, single, 2in flowers in abundance, followed by small red hips in autumn

Adélaïde d'Orléans is an extremely vigorous, once-flowering evergreen. The

small, dark-pink buds open out to loosely petalled, semi-double flowers, 2½in across, flesh pink at first, fading to cream and white, that hang down gracefully

Albertine, an old favourite with stout, prickly wood. The coral buds open to medium-sized (3in–4in), semi-double, salmon-pink flowers, paling as they age, with brighter, darker, coppery reverses. They are borne in small clusters, with a strong, sweet scent. The plant has glossy dark-green

leaves, bronzy when young, and grows to about 15ft

Débutante. The flowers of this once-flowering Wichurana rambler are a beautiful clear rose pink (fading to creamy pink), fully double with muddled centres, lightly scented and profusely borne in long clusters. It makes a vigorous, slender plant, 15ft high, with neat, dark leaves

Ghislaine de Féligonde is a repeat-flowering rambler, 10ft high, with bright nasturtium-orange buds that open pale

apricot in long, spacious clusters of six to 12 musk-scented flowers. In cool weather and in autumn, they are pinker, with larger clusters. The plant is almost thornless, with large, handsome, pale-green leaves

Mme Alice Garnier is a repeat-flowering Wichurana rambler with small, fully double flowers and neatly quilled, apricot-coloured petals and a fruity scent. The blooms arrive in clusters of five to 15 on a vigorous 12ft plant with small, neat, glossy, dark-green leaves