

Restyling the rose

David Austin's name is synonymous with roses; he has been breeding them for more than 50 years, introducing some 200 selections which have helped repopularise and redefine their use in gardens around the world >>

Author and photographer: Nicola Stocken

New Rosa Olivia Rose Austin ('Ausmixture') is one of David Austin's finest selections. Named after his granddaughter, it is highly disease resistant with soft pink blooms developing from pretty buds that slowly open into shallow, cupped rosettes. This is one of three new cultivars David Austin Roses is launching at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show this month (see also News, p17).

It is half a century since David Austin VMH launched his first rose, splendid *Rosa* 'Constance Spry' (see introductions, below), but he never dreamt of the many exquisite roses, awards and the thriving family business that would follow. 'Plant breeding started as a hobby, but then I had the idea of crossing old roses, for their beauty and fragrance, with modern Hybrid Teas which repeat flower and come in many colours,' he says.

Inspired by nurseryman Edward Bunyard's *Old Garden Roses* (1936) he made his first attempt aged 20. It was disastrous. 'In my first tray, all the seedlings suffered from damping off (a fungal disease) and I lost the lot. The next year I made absolutely sure I treated against the disease,' he recalls with the dogged determination that has marked his distinguished career as a rose breeder, and earned him the Society's prestigious Victoria Medal of Honour (VMH).

Selection process

It takes real passion, patience and perseverance to consistently breed great roses, and David Austin has the same reserves of these virtues now as he ever had. 'I've always had to look eight years into the future because that's how long it takes for a rose seedling to progress successfully through the rigorous selection

process and trials,' he says. Of the staggering 115,000 hand-crossed rose seedlings that are reared each year, just three or four will be launched. Throughout, David meets almost daily with Carl Bennet, manager of the breeding programme at the 8,000sq m (2 acres) of show gardens at the nursery in Albrighton, Shropshire where he was born and still lives. These gardens are also home to a Plant Heritage National Plant Collection of English roses.

During the breeding process, each seedling (its parentage precisely documented) flowers in the first year, and is graded by a 15-strong team. 'At this early stage, a rose can only be assessed on the beauty of the flower and its fragrance, but you can't tell its vigour or disease resistance,' David says. The numbers are whittled down to 6,000, which are planted outdoors in the trial grounds. Of these, only one in 30 is chosen for the last three years of trials, and at the end just a handful are selected for introduction. 'It's impossible to define beauty in a rose, but you know it when you see it. There's an almost human quality about roses,' says David, who to date has introduced some 200 new selections to cultivation.

Some of his early roses have been superseded by improved selections, but more than half are still available, achieving David's original goal of



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David Austin (left) in his gardens beside a sculpture by his late wife, Pat Austin.



At David Austin's nursery, the breeding process is lengthy and painstaking, with each hand-pollinated flower carefully recorded (above).

breeding roses with good fragrance, capturing the various scents of old roses as well as their charm. 'What's difficult is breeding out disease and getting sufficient vigour for bushy or gracefully arching growth, while continually broadening the range,'

Fragrance is a key element, and this can easily be lost if the wrong parents are chosen. 'Some of the best lookers have been crosses with *Rosa Bonica* ('Meidomonac') which is not scented, and you can never overcome that,' he says.

Diversity in gardens

As the years have passed, David has bred an increasingly broad range of roses. 'My aim is diversity. I don't want to walk into every garden and

find that all the roses look the same.' His introductions include climbers, ramblers, miniatures and standards, but it is for English roses, those that closely resemble old roses (Damask, Gallica and Alba roses) – his original source of inspiration – that he is best known. Of these, one of the most enduring is *R. Graham Thomas* of 1983 which marked the end of a 14-year 'barren period' since the launch of *R. Wife of Bath* and was named after the renowned horticulturist.

'Graham was a frequent visitor to the nursery, and chose this rose himself – we've never bred quite the same shade of yellow since,' says David. In terms of colour, only a true blue rose has so far eluded his skill, simply because the colour is not in the genes. For the future, though, >>



David Austin rose introductions



1961 *Rosa* 'Constance Spry' David Austin's first rose is still widely grown today for its magnificent, deeply cupped blooms of luminous delicacy and strong myrrh scent.



1969 *Wife of Bath* ('Ausbeth') One of the first five repeat-flowerers introduced; a tough, reliable rose with bushy, twiggly growth and fragrant, cupped pink blooms.



1983 *Graham Thomas* ('Ausmas') This rose of a distinctive shade of yellow was quite a bold colour at the time of breeding. It has a strong, fresh, tea-rose fragrance.



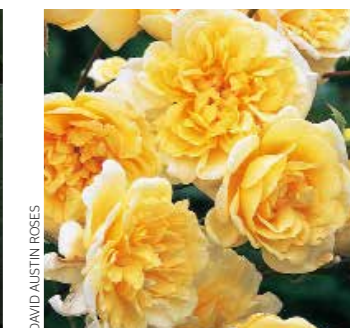
1986 *Gertrude Jekyll* ('Ausbord') Scrolled buds open into large, rosette-shaped flowers; this fine rose has been voted a favourite selection on several occasions.



1992 *Golden Celebration* ('Ausgold') This bold, rich yellow English rose in the form of a giant, full-petalled cup, is one of the largest flowered and most magnificent. The tea-scented flowers can develop hints of sauterne wine and strawberry.



1996 *A Shropshire Lad* ('Ausied') This rose bears flowers opening cupped, then forming large rosettes of perfectly arranged, peachy pink petals. Has a delicious fragrance.



2000 *Malvern Hills* ('Auscanary') The first David Austin rambling rose to be repeat flowering, with clusters of small, double yellow blooms; lightly fragrant.

David Austin roses

plant health is paramount. 'We have plants in the pipeline that promise to be disease resistant – ideal for our wet British climate, which is not the best for roses.'

Passing on the baton

One of the most frequently asked questions of David's career is which rose he likes most. 'To choose one over another would be like picking your favourite child. It's impossible because different ones have different attributes.' His son, David JC Austin, joined the business in 1990 as managing director in charge of the commercial side, freeing his father to concentrate on the breeding programme and his writing. The company has expanded to employ 200 people with centres in Japan and America, which have boosted overseas sales from 5 to 50 percent. In Japan, the company flourishes through a smaller replica of the UK nursery and show gardens; in the USA, cut flowers are in demand.

That David Austin Roses is a family



David Austin with his son, David JC Austin, and grandson, Richard.

business is appreciated. 'I'm my father's son,' says the younger David, 'and we think alike, so there's unrivalled consistency and continuity – that's the essence of a family business.' A third generation, in the form of David's son Richard, has now also joined the company.

To breed roses successfully for decades takes something special. 'It's a mixture of science, skill and luck,' says David; at 88 years old, he knows this better than anyone. 'While you must look after the health and vigour of the plant, it's vital to concentrate on the essential beauty of the flower you are breeding, and try to enhance this.'

David Austin has won a remarkable 14 Gold medals at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show, but perhaps his greatest achievement is in the joy his roses bring countless gardeners, as he confirms. 'It's a source of satisfaction to see the pleasure they give, bred above all for the charm, beauty and fragrance of their individual flowers.' ●

FURTHER INFORMATION

David Austin Roses Plant Centre, Rose Gardens and Restaurant, Bowling Green Lane, Albrighton, Wolverhampton WV7 3HB; 01902 376300;

www.davidaustinroses.com

♣ David Austin Rose Gardens open 9am-5pm daily, admission free.



2004 Harlow Carr ('Aushouse') A small yet fantastically fragrant and floriferous rose with shallow cupped pink blooms almost to ground level on a rounded shrub. Tough and easy to grow, it was named after RHS Garden Harlow Carr, North Yorkshire.



DAVID AUSTIN ROSES

More from the RHS David Austin Roses will be displaying many roses including several new selections on its stand GPB6 in the Great Pavilion at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show 2014. Ticket booking line: 0844 3387539. For more information visit www.rhs.org.uk/chelsea



HOWARD RICE

2007 Claire Austin ('Ausprior') Named after David's daughter, this is his finest white rose, with cupped, lemon buds that open to large, myrrh-perfumed flowers.

2014 Olivia Rose Austin ('Ausmixture') A particularly beautiful and fragrant rose that is vigorous and almost totally without disease.