



A Rose by Another Name . . .

by
Pat Holloway

Invariably, every spring, I answer a lot of questions about our “native” Sitka rose. “Where can I find it in the wild?” “Does it grow all over the state?” “Does it come in any other colors than pink?” Local vendors such as Fred Meyer routinely sell Sitka roses to Fairbanks gardeners. I have always puzzled over why these flowers are called Sitka roses since they are native to China, Japan and Korea, not Alaska. Sitka roses are Rugosa or Turkestan roses, *Rosa rugosa*, and have no connection to Alaska except for the fact that they thrive throughout the coastal and interior regions and are one of the best-loved perennials in Alaska’s gardens.

As I began my search of references to Sitka roses, I found that my curiosity was not new, and the legendary Sitka rose has been around for a long time. I located a transcript of a speech given by Phillip M. Gardner at the American Rose Society Pacific Northwest District Convention in Chehalis, Washington, on June 29, 1968. As a member of the Alaska Rose Society, he too, wondered what the Sitka rose was, and he compiled an interesting record to show no such native rose exists. Below is an excerpt from his presentation.

“Alaska, which is comparatively young in statehood and, as with all states, likes to identify itself with a romantic past. With us, it is the gold rush, Robert Service, Jack London, the Russian occupation, Lord Baranoff, and the Russian missionaries. . . . I personally enjoy stories of the past, especially those concerning the legend of the rose, but it would be well to stop and choose now before fact has fallen before fancy. [The book], *Modern Roses VI*, defines the Sitka rose as follows: ‘Sitka (origin unknown) said to have been raised from a rose brought from Russia and grafted to a local wild rose. Single or dougle, fragrant, pink, deep pink, purple-red, or white. Foliage wrinkled, gray-green. Very thorny, fruit large, round, red. Ht. 6-8 feet. Resistant to cold, heat, dryness, poor soil and widely grown in Alaska.’

Now I ask you, is this description a little familiar? Could you recognize a Sitka rose? . . . Shortly after I arrived in Alaska, I saw . . . Rugosa roses blooming in Palmer, Anchorage, Kenai and even up in Fairbanks. But, whenever I mentioned to home owners that they were Rugosas, I’d receive a shake of the head and, “No, these are Sitkas” . . .

. Was this a spontaneous sporting of the old Rugosa miraculously developed in Sitka perhaps due to a happy combination of cold, dampness and subarctic northern lights?

Let me digress a while - The Rugosa species is a rather recent arrival to the New World. It is a member of the group Cinnamomeae and is native to North Eastern Asia, the Northern China, Korea and Japan. It was first recorded by Carl Thunberg, a naturalist and classifier, in 1784 in the gardens of Kyoto, Japan. From there it was called the Romanas or Hedgehog rose. E.A. Bunyard in his book, *Old Garden Roses*, relates how the Chinese portrayed this rose as far back as 1000 AD. It was introduced from Japan into Great Britain in 1796 by Lee and Kennedy of Hammersmith but was not very well received at that time. Then later on the Rugosa was again introduced by Siebold in 1845. This time it became accepted. In the United States,



Thomas Hogg introduced the single form in 1872; and in 1892, Professor J.L. Budd of Iowa State College, worked with the large single crimson form and also with a double plena form that he brought back from St. Petersburg. The magenta colored double rose from Russia was later distributed as ‘Empress of the North’ and is thought to be a sport of the single rose. Almost immediately, hybridizers commenced to work; but of the many hybrids that resulted, only a relatively few survive today.

Last winter when I was in Sitka, . . . I called upon everyone that might have a chance bit of information concerning the “rose”. Joe Ashy, the custodian of the Sitka National Cemetery, . . . drove me out to the old experiment station, now occupied by the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey Seismic Group. In front of the house and to the right of the access road lie orderly rows of ancient apple trees. This road ends at a garage, back of which lies a path that traverses the trial fields now overgrown. To the west of the path was an area thickly massed with rose bushes and upon examination I found thickets of *Rosa nutkana* and Rugosas.

I visited the old Russian cemetery in which the Orthodox are still interred, expecting to find the legendary rose bush but there were none to be seen in the entire area nor was there one on the hill where the Russian Princess and other royalty were buried. It would seem that if the Sitka rose was brought here by the Russians that this would be a place of collection. The double Rugosas that I saw in the City were in recent yards and gardens. Then where, we may ask ourselves, can we find the answer?

John Green Brady, arrived in Sitka on March 13, 1878, as a minister. He was later appointed Governor of Alaska from 1897 to 1906. Governor Brady was known as the Rose Governor as he greatly loved the rose and cultivated several varieties about his home in Sitka. . . . Another personage that we might consider was Walter E. Clark, who became governor of Alaska in 1909. Governor Clark was afterwards the founder of the Charleston West Virginia Rose Society and became the president of the American Rose Society in 1928. Although there is no direct connection between these men and the Sitka rose, they no doubt created the climate that generated the Sitka rose.

In 1898 Congress appropriated funds for the establishment of an experimental station in Sitka, but it was not until 1902 that actual work was begun. [Charles] Georgeson was named Superintendent, and from his reports the following information may be obtained . . .

Georgeson saw Rugosa roses growing in abundance on the west coast of Japan. There, the rose had economic value for a delicate yellow dye extracted from the roots and used to dye silks. The Rugosa rose was first brought to Sitka from Nelson, Manitoba. Plants were propagated from seed, root cuttings, and layering from 1903 through at least 1921. Selections of Rugosas were sent by Georgeson to experiment stations in Kenai, Fort Yukon, Rampart, Kodiak, Copper Center and later to Matanuska and Fairbanks.’

I believe that this clears up the mystery of the Sitka rose. Dr. Charles Georgeson introduced the plant into Alaska in 1902 and helped spread it far and wide. Gardeners throughout the state received the plants from Sitka, thus the name, Sitka rose. This plant does, however, have far more distant roots.

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