

WALSH'S STILL-POPULAR RAMBLING ROSES

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From *The American Rose Annual 2003*

In 1911, the American Rose Society awarded a Gold Medal to Michael H. Walsh, the famed New England hybridizer of rambling roses. It was only the second time in the life of the society, founded in 1899, that such an honor had been bestowed. Since 1900, Walsh had distinguished himself by producing one glorious rambler after another. Using old garden roses crossed with the species roses 'R. Multiflora' and 'R. Wichuraiana' (which had been introduced

from the Far East in the late 1800s), he created long-caned, profusely flowering bushes. Remarkably, a century later, some of Walsh's roses are still popular.

For sheer mass of bloom, these hardy, climbing roses simply cannot be surpassed. Versatility is their middle name. They can be grown on banks or as ground covers, used to camouflage

unsightly stumps or ramshackle buildings, and can be trained on any number of decorative garden structures. Some, like Walsh's 'Evangeline', a fragrant, pale pink, variety with long flexible canes up to 20 feet, are

champion tree growers. Although most ramblers bloom for only four to six weeks each summer, there are early and late varieties, making possible a long summer display.

When introduced at the turn of the century, ramblers became instantly popular with gardeners. While fewer of them grace gardens today than in the past, they have by no means totally disappeared. Walsh roses can be seen across New England, as well as in villages throughout France and England. Just south of Paris, in La Roseraie de l'Häy-les-Roses (arguably the greatest rose garden in the world), Walsh roses cascade from a variety of decorative structures. The famed Sangerhausen Rosarium in Germany also maintains many Walsh ramblers.

Michael H. Walsh was born in Wales in 1848. Twenty years later, he immigrated to the United States. He arrived in Woods Hole, MA, a tiny village on the southeastern tip of Cape Cod, at the age of 27. He had been invited to assume the role of head gardener on the harbor-front estate of Joseph Story Fay. Walsh stayed there for the rest of his life, transforming it into a horticultural paradise, the crowning glory of which was its roses.

Walsh began his gardening career at 11 years old as an apprentice on an English country estate. It was there that he learned to bud roses. After accepting employment on the Fay estate in Woods Hole, he supervised the planting of many exotic trees, some of which are still standing today — stately reminders of the magnificent English-style gardens that once existed there. Walsh also grew prize-winning vegetables and flowering shrubs, but it was his experiments in hybridizing roses that brought him his greatest recognition.

In 1897, greenhouses to facilitate year-round cultivation of roses were built for Walsh by his patron, Fay's



Catalog cover of Walsh roses.

daughter, Sarah B. Fay. In recognition of her gardener's extraordinary talent, she released him from other duties so he could devote himself full-time to the development of roses. An avid rose grower herself, Sarah is said to have personally chosen the charming names that many of the Walsh ramblers bear. Together, they exhibited their roses at major horticultural shows, winning numerous trophies. In the archives of the Woods Hole Historical Museum can be found a collection of their award certificates. Elegantly inscribed by hand, they are similar to those used by the ARS today and bear inscriptions such as "First Prize - 12 Named Varieties, Hardy Roses, three of each" or "Best Rose Introduced since 1901."

By the turn of the century, the roses on the Fay estate had acquired a "not to be missed" reputation. Each June, hundreds of rose lovers came to Woods Hole from as faraway as Philadelphia, New York and Boston. Following her father's custom, Miss Fay opened her splendid 3-acre garden to the public and enjoyed discussing the fine points of rose growing with visitors. Today, these rose gardens no longer exist, but it is still possible to spot Walsh roses growing in people's yards throughout the picturesque seaside town.

Although Walsh exhibited several types of roses, the ones for which he won his most illustrious honors were his ramblers. Particularly popular and famous among these was 'Hiawatha', a dark crimson, single-petaled rose with a white eye; 'Excelsa', a bright, very double red; and the single, soft pink 'Evangeline'. In 1905, the Royal National Rose Society of Great Britain awarded its prestigious Gold Medal to Walsh's lovely rambler 'Lady Gay'. And in 1914, the ARS bestowed its Gertrude Hubbard Gold Medal upon 'Excelsa', still beloved in gardens around the world. Walsh was also honored by the Massachusetts Horticultural Society in 1912 with its top award, the George Robert White medal for eminent service to horticulture.

Walsh shipped his roses all over the United States, his catalog offering "strong, two-year-old dormant plants 50 cents each, \$5 a dozen, or 100 for \$38"! In fact, so many thousands of rose bushes were shipped from Woods



'Debutante'

"A strong point with my plants is their great hardiness. Grown here in New England, with its 'old-fashioned winters,' high winds and low temperatures... the plants absorb a vitality that insures robust growth when transplanted to other parts of the country."

'Evangeline'





Tall row of ramblers.

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Walsh-Fay Rose Garden, Woods Hole, MA, circa 1900.



Hole in late spring and fall that it became necessary for a Federal inspector to live on the estate to pass on the huge out-of-state distribution! Walsh roses also made their way to Europe, becoming enormously popular in English gardens. Writing in his sales catalog, Walsh remarked proudly: "A strong point with my plants is their great hardiness. Grown here in New England, with its 'old-fashioned winters,' high winds and low temperatures... the plants absorb a vitality that insures robust growth when transplanted to other parts of the country."

Walsh's methods for rose growing were primarily organic. He credited his success to "continuous attention and high cultivation." In his gorgeous catalogs, complete with photographs of roses in the Fay gardens, he offered much good advice. For example: "If

[w]hite [t]hrup[s] or [h]opper appears, it indicates a lack of moisture in the soil; this [t]hrup[s] will not attack the plants except in hot, dry weather. Call into requisition the force pump or hydrant hose, and wash the bushes on the underside of the leaves. Do not wait for rain; delays are dangerous."

For more than forty years, Walsh cultivated roses on the Fay estate. It was not easy work. Hundreds of tons of heavy fertilizer were worked into the sandy soil so that it would hold water. Being so close to the harbor subjected the roses to being enveloped by fog for long periods of time, as well as high winds from coastal storms. In 1901, a fire in the railroad depot directly below the estate burned for three days sending toxic fumes across the gardens. In spite of Walsh's repeated pleas to railroad officials to put out the fire, no action was taken. His entire crop of roses was destroyed, including all the stock of an award winning hybrid tea rose he was



'Excelsa' blooming on a Woods Hole fence.

In 1914, the ARS bestowed its Gertrude Hubbard Gold Medal upon 'Excelsa', still beloved in gardens around the world.

'Excelsa'

about to put on the market. Later, he and Miss Fay successfully sued the railroad and settled out of court for \$20,000. His share of the money enabled him to resume his business, which he continued successfully until his death in 1922.

A small, memorial rose garden was created in 1943 near the Woods Hole

Historical Museum. A stone in the center, surrounded by fences covered in Walsh roses, bears the inscription: "Near this place lived Michael H. Walsh who made the Rambler Rose world famous." He was perhaps the best known of the pioneer rambler hybridizers, but it is interesting to note that Walsh is not responsible with

creating the most famous rambler of all time. That distinction belongs to Jackson & Perkins for their 1901 rose 'Dorothy Perkins', which brought the company its first significant fame and fortune.

So similar was 'Dorothy Perkins' to Walsh's 'Lady Gay' that people often had difficulty distinguishing between

the two. In a sad letter written late in her life, several years after Walsh's death, Sarah B. Fay wrote of her conviction that credit had not been given where it was rightfully due. She was sure that the wildly successful J&P rose had originally been created in her gardens by Walsh. Unfortunately, there were no patents in those days, nor did she and Walsh have J&P's huge financial resources for marketing. "Mr. Walsh," she wrote, "never cared for money; he just loved the roses intensely..."

Fortunately, the time honored success of Walsh's roses has insured their place in rose history, as well as in the hearts of many who still enjoy them in their gardens. ARS Consulting Rosarian Dan Russo, who grows more than a hundred varieties of rambling roses at his home in Rhode Island, laments that many of the Walsh roses are now out of commerce. However, he is proud to say that searching gardens on Cape Cod and throughout Southeast New England, he has "managed to locate about 25 of the 38 varieties" known to have been created by Walsh. "They have," he says, "a nice, old-fashioned look and no other roses bloom so profusely or create such an effect."



The author wishes to thank Dan Russo for his invaluable assistance with this article.

Editor's note: Although the term "rambler" is used extensively throughout this article, it is no longer recognized as an official class by the American Rose Society. The roses formerly within the rambler class were redistributed into other classes — primarily hybrid wichurana and hybrid rugosa. For more information on this subject, see the September 1999 issue of American Rose.



'Lady Gay'



'Evangeline' ▲

▼ 'Hiawatha'

