

# Growing Medieval Roses

*Lord Manus MacDhai*

*Barony of Windmasters' Hill*

## Growing Rosa Mundi in central Atlantia

About 11 years ago, I decided to combine two of my hobbies, SCA and growing roses, by studying the varieties of roses grown during the Medieval and Renaissance periods and grow period varieties in my garden. I have 6 raised beds in my side yard where I grow mostly roses. with some lavender and irises scattered in. This area is on the north side of my house and under a powerline easement (which runs basically east to west) so it gets lots of sun. The soil is heavy clay so I opted to use raised beds.

I have a mix of modern, Old Garden Roses, and period roses in my garden. Old Garden Roses (OGR), also referred to as Heritage or Historic roses, are defined as rose varieties that were in existence before 1867, the year the first modern Hybrid Tea rose was introduced. Therefore, period rose actually fall under the OGR classification. At one point, I had over 60 varieties of roses in my mix. Alas, I have not been so diligent in care so I have lost a number of bushes.

### **Rosa Mundi (*R. gallica versicolor*)**



One of the period roses that I have had some luck with is Rosa Mundi (*R. gallica versicolor*). This gallica rose is actually sport of the Apothecary Rose (*R. gallica officinalis*). A sport is a spontaneous mutation in stem of a rose bush that display different characteristics, like a bloom of a different color or size, or long arching cane (“climbing”), from the base bush. When the

stem is propagated by asexual means (cutting or grafting), the resulting plant maintains the change. Rosa Mundi is a red and pink striped bloom while the Apothecary Rose is solid red.

L'Obel described Rosa Mundi in 1581, as did Clusius in 1583. Gerard also mentions this rose. However, it is thought to be much older in origin. It is thought that this rose is named after the mistress of Henry II, Fair Rosamound.

## Source of plant stock

I purchased my Rosa Mundi plant from Roses Unlimited in Laurens SC in 2002.

## Growth habit

Being a gallica rose, Rosa Mundi grows as a patch of relatively thin canes, which grow about 3-4 ft high. It spreads by sending out long canes that run underground. Over time, it spread throughout the bed where I planted it. To give a better idea of the growth habit, the drawing below is from the website of Vintage Gardens (<http://www.vintagegardens.com/index.html>). Rose Mundi (and most gallicas) have a growth habit of #1.



## Current status

In recent years, I have not spent much time taking care of the garden, weeding, pruning, feeding, etc. As a result, I have lost a number of bushes. Some just got overrun and overshadowed by their neighbors. The climate here in NC is pretty humid so we get a lot of the different fungal diseases like black spot and powdery mildew. As a result of the lack of care, the bed where the Rosa Mundi was planted got overrun by weeds. These weeds compete with the roses for soil nutrients, water and light. Water has not been an issue since I have a watering system installed each bed. However, one of the other problems with the weeds is they reduce the airflow around the roses, thereby preventing the roses from drying, which leads to increased incidents of fungal diseases. Roses are heavy feeders so it is best to apply fertilizer on a monthly basis during the prime growing season (April to September in Altantia). Since I have been neglecting the roses for the past couple of years, the growth of the bushes was stunted and the bloom production reduced.

While not particularly susceptible to black spot, I have see a fair amount of powdery mildew on the Rosa Mundi. This leads to a quandry. In the past, I have not sprayed the Rosa Mundi with fungicide because I wanted to be able to use the petals for edible projects without having to

worry about chemical contamination. Do I spray the rose to address the fungal issues? or do I just ignore the fungus or find a food-safe way to address the problem?

At present, I have dug out most of the rose bushes in that particular bed that contained the Rosa Mundi and put the plants in pots. My plan is to completely clean out the bed over the winter, replacing the landscape timbers, which have rotted away over the years, with a stacked wall block. This will result in a more stable and attractive structure (it will look like castle walls) that will not rot. I will probably replace much of the soil in hopes of improving it and getting rid of the weeds. Once the bed is rebuilt, I will put the roses I saved in pots, including the Rosa Mundi, back in.

## Additional Information:

### History of Roses in Europe

Man has grown roses throughout recorded history. Widely cultivated by the Greeks and the Romans, the cultivation declined in western Europe with the decline of the Roman Empire. This changed during 12th and 13th centuries as people returning from the Crusades brought roses, cultivated in the Middle East, back with them. Roses were valued for their beauty and fragrance and cultivated for medicinal and cosmetic purposes.

In addition to the species of roses that grow natively in western and northern Europe, a number of varieties emerged during our period and cultivation of these varieties continue through present day. Both the native and introduced varieties have one significant characteristic in common: they would bloom only once during the year. The one exception to this is the Damask rose *Rose des Quatre Saisons*, which could produce a second blush in the fall. Roses that repeated bloom were not grown in Europe until the 18th and 19th centuries, when rose species from central and eastern Asia were introduced.

### Period Rose Varieties

- Gallica

Gallica roses, also called the Rose of Provins or the French Rose, are generally have blooms of 12 petals or less and range in color from pink to a dark red. They grow well in a wide variety of soil conditions and is one of the primary varieties cultivated for medicinal purposes. They spread by way of long underground stems and are prolific seed producers. The Apothecary Rose (*R. gallica officinalis*) is reputed to have been brought back by the Count of Champagne, Theobald IV, in the mid 13th century, when he returned from the Crusades. The gallica rose is also thought to be the “Red Rose of Lancaster”

- **Alba**

As one might infer from the name, the characteristic of Alba roses is their light color. They range from white to a very light pink. It is rumored that the “White Rose of York”, emblem of the Yorkist side in the “Wars of the Roses”, the English dynastic conflicts in the mid-15th century, was an Alba rose.

- **Centifolia**

It is hard to identify the origins of *R. centifolia*, The Cabbage Rose or the Hundred-petalled Rose. There are references in Pliny and Theophrastus that could be identified as *R. centifolia*; however, it not until late in the 16th century that there are again mentions of this variety of rose. Roses of this variety have a very high petal count; as a result, they produce few, if any, viable seeds.

- **Damask**

Damask roses are noted for being among the most fragrant of varieties. In modern times, they are grown in Romania and Turkey for the production of attar of rose, a distillation of the rose fragrance. They are divided into two sub-categories: Summer Damask and Autumn Damask.

- **Summer Damask** roses are believed to be a cross between Gallica roses and *R. phoenicea*. These fragrant rose bloom during the summer.
- **Autumn Damask** roses are thought to be a cross between Gallica roses and *R. moschata*. Of the roses that grew in period in Europe, the Autumn Damask was the only one that was noted to bloom more than once in a year.

- **Yellow roses:**

- *R. foetida*, also called the Austrian Briar, is a yellow rose with 5 petals. It was introduced from central Asia in the 16th century. Gerard mentions growing it and, in 1587, the French botanist Dalechamps states it was recently introduced in France.
- *R. hemisphaerica*, the Sulfur rose, is also yellow but has a lot more petals. This rose does best in hot, dry climates. In colder/wetter environs, the blooms do not open and tend to ball and rot without opening. It was described growing in Calcutta in 1503 and Clusius brought it to Holland in about 1600.

- **Native rose species**

- *R. canina*, the dog rose, is a common hedgerow bush throughout central and western Europe. The blooms are single (5 petals) of blush white to pink. It has been used in modern times as rootstock for grafted roses. Its hips are also

harvested because they are very high in Vitamin C.

- *R. eglanteria*, also called the sweet briar, is a vigorous shrub that produces pale pink scented blossoms.
- *R. arvensis*. The field rose has creamy white blossoms of 5 petals with pronounced yellow stamens. Some think that this rose is the real origin of the White Rose of York since this plant is known to have grown in areas of Yorkshire and central England where a number of the battles were fought.
- *R. sempervirens*: the evergreen rose is a rambling bush with white fragrant blossoms that occur in clusters. It is native to southern Europe and north Africa.
- *R. spinosissima*: Also called the Scots rose, this is a low dense growing bush that is native to northern Europe. It has creamy white blossoms and the branches of the bush are VERY prickly.
- *R. cinnamomea*: Also called *R. majalis*, the Cinnamon rose has pink blossoms. The bark is a cinnamon brown color, hence the name.