

Paris and London in Spring: Gardens and Comments

-- Jim Delahanty

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The plan was simple: On Tuesday we would drive to Chartres and visit the Roserie de L'Hay-des-Roses on the return to Paris. On Thursday we would travel west to Giverny (Monet's Home and Garden) and return by way of Malmaison (Empress Josephine's Home and Gardens). Good training for driving in Paris would be the nerves of steel required for participating in the NASCAR races at Talladega, Alabama. The ride to Roserie de L'Hay-des-Roses was relatively uneventful except for nomenclature. All of the tour books, guides, and garden books refer to the Roserie as the Roserie de l'Hay-des-Roses which actually is the name of the city; the name of the garden technically (since 1938 when it was acquired by the department in which the city and garden is located) the Roserie du Val-de-Marne. The Roserie is located approximately five miles south of Paris. Clear signs get you to the city. Then all of the signs to the Roserie refer to the Val du Marne and only careful reading will find the Roserie, cheek by jowl to the Square Salvador Allende which has a little park and carousel. The Roserie was started by a French businessman, Jules Gravereaux, in 1892 and became so famous that the village changed its name to correspond with the estate.

Garden books cite the layout of the garden as one of the mainsprings of rose gardening in the 20th century. However, for the average rosarian, the interest starts with the fact that there are 3100 different varieties and over 15 thousand rose bushes. Many of these roses are not to be found elsewhere. As someone who recently did an article on the roses in J. Horace McFarland's 'Roses of the World in Color,' I automatically noted roses not to be found in the United States at all and those with unusual names, such as '**Kardinal Piffil**,' a 1925 HT with orange-red flowers and a golden yellow reverse. Or '**Paul Lede**,' a climbing Tea rose of apricot blend flowers. Another interest for the space restricted gardener is the space in four acres to use extensively and imaginatively a great number of Multiflora, Wichurana, and Rambler hybrids to great effect. From the first sight of the garden and the buildings that house the entrance and small exhibition room, you can see the gray stone wall facing the west covered with '**Santa Catalina**,' a 1970 climbing floribunda from McGredy ascending and covering the edifice with light pink flowers spaced with a precision that could not possibly be accidental.

Indeed, the incredible truth of the Roserie is that in the ancient quarrel between letting the rose have its way with man versus man with the rose, man's will is totally dominant in this garden. Roses have been teased, cajoled, trained, seduced, and coerced into every possible and conceivable pattern in which roses could go. Roses are on domes, up tripods, as standard standards, as weeping standards, on square structures with a different rose at each corner, above allees, swinging from swags, upon walls, and hedges, in trees, and neatly tucked away in beds where their production is limited to a mere dozen or so despite a will in the rose to proliferate and spread. There is even a rose twisted in the circles resembling a freeway interchange.

But the great triumph of all of it is the vista leading to the Grand pergola and the supporting wings at the end of the formal rose garden at the opposite extreme from the entrance. This is an enormous structure reaching some eighteen or twenty feet in height. Great trunks of '**Alexandre Girault**' climb up the supports for the wings and the pergola dome. The flowers of this large climbing wichurana hybrid are a coppery pink, salmon at the base, large and floating above the foliage which permits the structure of the lattice work to be backlit by the sun. A non-recurrent rose, it was in all of its glory in late May. It provided an enormous color palette as the backdrop to the enclosure of the garden. Sited in the areas between the trunks of '**Alexandre Girault**' were alternating bushes of two other climbers: '**Phyllis Bide**' and '**Ghislaine de Feligonde**,' both climbers to eight feet or more and yellow fading to flesh color versus yellow fading to a light pink; beneath the climbers were organized beds of '**Fetes des Meres**' (Mothersday), with deep red cupped blooms, another of the Koster sports. Leading up to this display along the paths of the formal garden are iron tripods of alternating displays of '**Paul's Scarlet Climber**', vivid red clusters of flowers in pillar growth and '**Mrs. F. W. Flight**,' another pillar type cultivar with rose-pink semi-double clustered flowers.

The garden is laid out in thirteen formal sections with modern French and foreign roses to the left of the entrance, the formal rose garden with reflecting pool in the center, and the old garden roses and older or classic roses to the extreme right. There is a special section for roses grown by Empress Josephine at Malmaison, and long rows of teas, rugosas, and Scotch roses encompassing the outer perimeters of the property. At one time there was a wonderful machine in the exhibition or display area along the café dispensing ice cream and coffee; the machine contained a dozen or more scents associated with roses, including the familiar, citrus scent, damask, old rose, and the like. The trick was to insert a Popsicle stick which would be sprayed with a scent which the visitor was to identify before checking with the machine. The hidden factor in this scent machine was one identified as 'bear grease.' It would be hard to assess whether or not the machine were correct, given the relative unfamiliarity of most of us with bear grease. Unfortunately, at this visit, the machine was disassembled and inoperative.

The last time I visited the Roserie, in July of 1996, we were charmingly greeted by Stephanie who announced: "**No Roses!**"

Others have mentioned visiting in late summer, to find the plants covered with blackspot. Whatever sins of commission or omission may occur later in the year, late Spring-from late May to mid-June must be the garden's glory days. But even in its glory, it was not overcrowded or invisible beneath the crush of people. In fact, the Roserie must be one of the best-kept tourist secrets in Paris. There is no web site to commemorate its days. There are no supportive associations to broadcast its charms. It remains a treasure shining in unheralded glory on a late spring day while people lounge on benches and feed ice cream to their children.

Not so with Giverny. The best way to see Giverny, Monet's gardens with the water lilies, and arbored roses and swaying companion plants is in the comfort of your own home via the VCR. In my personal opinion even better than a videocassette are the paintings of Monet which have a vitality and truth no longer present in the garden itself. And if you can glimpse the garden as he painted it in the last of his years with declining sight, it is a vision incapable of reproduction in nature. In any event, Giverny was restored about twenty years ago and contains Monet's house, a

series of formal beds leading from the house to the street, and a series of ponds and bridges on the other side of an underground walkway. The gardens are opposite in tone and ambience: the gardens beneath the house more lively and bursting with color and light. The bridge and ponds are more somber in tone and reflect a deeper quieter vision of the world. Unfortunately, the crowds are so dense, and dense that enjoyment is almost impossible. What is most irritating is that almost no one looks at the gardens because they are so busy taking pictures of themselves or their relatives. My best advice is to avoid Giverny unless you can arrange a personal private tour or get the foundation to ban all other visitors on the day of your arrival.

The Chateau de Malmaison is six and a half miles west of Paris and we paid a fleeting visit on the return from Giverny. Empress Josephine established her garden and her horticultural reputation at Malmaison, having collected an enormous range of plants including an extensive rose collection. The garden has been restored to public use in the last three decades after being sold for debts upon Josephine's death, trashed in the Franco-Prussian War, and alienated from one owner to another in the 19th century. The rose garden today is but a pale reflection of what it must have been, but it has its own mystique. There are about three dozen roses in the garden today compared with over 250 at the time of Josephine. However, reduced as the garden may be, it maintains a certain magic by virtue of the complementary character of its colors-the pastels and shades of the albas ('**Cuisse de Nympe Emue**'), centifolias ('**Rose des Peintres**'), mosses ('**Mousseux ancien**') and damasks ('**Rose du Puteaux**') punctuated by the deep crimson and purples of the gallicas such as '**La Belle Sultane**' and '**Cardinal Richielieu**'-have a soothing and calming effect on a hot summer's day while less than a half dozen people wander into the garden. Of the four visitors, I was the only one who cared for Malmaison; the others thought it not worth a drive from the city.

On the return from Malmaison, our driver elected to challenge the evening rush hour traffic that converges on the Arc de Triomphe. At this monument, thirteen streets debouch their traffic on a circle that has no discernible rules or regulations. It is as if all Paris were to decide that the operative motif was 'demolition derby.' Seated in the navigator's position, I can only report that one truck came within three inches of becoming intimate with my person and that, from the depths of childhood memory came furious imprecations such as "Now I lay me to sleep....." I suppose that undergoing this experience is akin to passing the Equator, joining the 'mile high' club, and playing 'chicken' in James Dean films; however, I intend not to do this again; it is too hard unclenching the arthritic fingers

On To London:.

The temperatures in London were, on the average, anywhere from ten to fifteen degrees cooler than in Paris. And it had been a cool and wet spring. Thus, the roses were considerably behind those in France in terms of bud and bloom. Thus, the older garden roses were more likely to be in bloom than the Hybrid Teas, or floribundas, or miniatures. The Queen Mary Rose Garden is located within the Inner Circle of Regent's Park (which also contains the London Zoo). The approach is from the Baker Street tube station where there are little tourist shrines to Sherlock Holmes-one of those cases where life imitates art.

Appropriately, Madame Tussaud's Wax Museum is nearby to provide the contrary. The Queen Mary Rose Garden provides other plants, but not as companion plantings to roses, but rather as other discrete and separate entities. A large bed of irises and other corm/rhizome plants connects outlying rose beds to a central path enclosing rectangular sections of lawn. Although we did not see the garden under optimal conditions as the weather that day veered from bright and humid to chilly and threatening within minutes of each other, there were several aspects to note. One was that solid blankets of color were an integral part of the garden. If you think the impact of one or two '**Margaret Merrill**' is impressive, the sight of seventy-two of them in bloom is downright regal. There are some 90 of these solid color bedded roses. And for the most part, the Hybrid Teas and floribundas of the eighties and nineties are cast in that mold. Many of these are roses, which for one reason or another, have not been introduced or are currently not in commerce in the United States. A particularly fine rose in that category is '**Mrs. Iris Clow**;' the rose is about two and half feet tall, with dark green foliage with blooms of light pink with a blush pink reverse, cupped and fragrant. Adding to the effect are bright red stems. The effect of a single plant is multiplied by a factor greater than the apparent seventy-two bushes in providing solid color banks juxtaposed beside each other since the impact is geometric rather than arithmetic in force.

Since the gardens were established in 1931, they have been re-planted in the 1950's and again in the mid-1990's. On the perimeters of the garden older garden roses, modern shrubs and David Austin roses are planted either singly or in groups of one or two. At the end opposite to the entrance from Baker Street is a circular pattern in which the central theme of solid banks of color is augmented by a circle of pillars with swags connecting them. Climbers and Ramblers of every kind connect the pillars and swags. It is here that many of the old favorites are to be found: '**Dr. Eckener**,' a hybrid Rugosa with coppery rose flowers aging pink or '**Madame Plantier**,' or '**Madame Hardy**.'

Kew Gardens are near the end of one of the tube lines all the way out in Richmond, where the Conservative candidate for Prime Minister had his Parliamentary seat. Building and re-building is occurring so quickly that dust settles on the bonnets of upscale Mercedes and BMW's. A morning spent at Kew hardly begins to scratch the surface of the many aspects of the Gardens. We visited the old Palm House, the Water Lily house, the rock garden and the Rose Gardens. Most of the rose gardens are located in semi-circular fashion behind the Palm House and were not quite yet in bloom. To the left were a series of ten raised beds featuring the development of the rose from the early species through the development of the various classes in the 19th and 20th centuries with examples of each. The Palm house was built in 1846 to house tropical and semi-tropical plants collected from around the world. Originally the palms and other plants were set in containers, an arrangement that did not provide a long life span for many of the specimens; hence the current arrangement where a few container plants are located near the entrance and the rest of the specimens are planted in raised beds. There were three disadvantages attached to this exhibit: one was that the humidity factor in the greenhouse was clammy; the second was that many of the plants were familiar to these Southern Californians (pineapple, bananas, bromeliads, etc); the third was that the exhibits were being used to educate and entertain school children, many of whom were being informed, organized, retrieved, and corralled in piercing tones that would have etched glass. Outside the Palm House an arrangement of replicas of all the heraldic

symbols used by the royal family ancestral to the current Queen were placed as if in guard - a collection of unicorns, griffins, lions rampant and lions couchant.

Kew is one of those attractions of some forty thousand plants that would take a lifetime to appreciate in full.

When we visited Covent Gardens street entertainers juggled with fire batons as well as oranges, mimed with creepy precision, and created instant audiences by sheer effort of will and desire, continuing a tradition already extant in the 17th century Punch and Judy shows. Where the old vegetable market used to be on a lower level now occupied by lace shops and wine bars, a pair of opera singers set up shop with an upscale karaoke for popular arias. The singers sang below at the foot of the stairs in the old vegetable market while the sound system carried the music up through the street level market and around the various stalls and boutiques. The tenor was a young man in his twenties with a voice not yet strong enough to carry the enormous burden of '**Nessun dorma.**' The soprano had a powerful voice that could have carried through the market area without the benefit of a sound system; in fact, I have not heard that kind of powerful voice projection since Ethel Merman beat listeners to death in the top rows of Broadway theatres. The singers would sing a few arias and then literally pass a tambourine or basket around for contributions from the listeners above them at the street level. She sang '**Sempre Libera**' from the coloratura repertoire, '**Vissi d'arte**' from the dramatic soprano catalog, and even one or two from the mezzo-soprano catalog. Her voice was so powerful that there was no hiding or shading when there was an occasional flat tone. I wondered about the wisdom of singing so many songs from different repertoires. But when she came near to pass the hat, I realized that voice protection was a lesser value than voice projection, since, like the lamb on the Chunnel train, this lamb was 'not young,' either.

Potpourri: Missing from the rose gardens we visited were miniatures and mauves. With the exception of one very small bed of miniature roses in Queen Mary's garden, miniatures were not featured at all in either the French or English rose gardens. An emissary of Star Roses at a Descanso seminar a few years ago noted that Europeans generally do not care for mauve roses; based on the availability of mauve roses at the gardens we visited, it is evident that his comment was entirely justified. Despite my comments on Giverney, it is clear that the best pictures we took were of the gardens there; perhaps the mania of the majority of visitors was contagious. One final note: With all of the baguettes and gourmet dinners, the desserts and late dining, I lost seven pounds. In weight, not money. So hate me.

-- JD, 2001