

A Man of Many Roses

By: Starla Harding



Capturing the character of Whit Wells with mere words is as challenging as capturing the beauty of his roses with a mere camera lens. More than just a hybridizer, Whit Wells is a rose artist, of sorts, and I believe that a little drop of this unique man is hybridized directly into each and every one of his distinctive rose creations. Jim and I have visited his greenhouse, tucked away in the little town of Brighton, TN, on three separate occasions (so far) and each visit leaves us wanting more.

Our first visit was three years ago on Mother's Day weekend. The rose blooms in his greenhouse had peaked only days before so that vibrant splashes of color and the scent of rose petals still filled the space in abundance. Jim and I stood there in a hypnotic trance as Whit began to walk. Like me, Whit Wells is more a story-teller than a lecturer and I have come to affectionately term his colorful spins on speech as "Whitisms." One of my favorites is his humble declaration that "God does 90% of my work while I do the other 10% and, truth be told, many times I'm not holding up my share."

As he began to walk he shared some of the more familiar stories of his life in roses including his involvement in starting Tennessee's Jackson Rose Society. This was only after he served as President and an active member of the Memphis Rose Society for many years prior. He made sure to note that out of a twenty-five year span, he missed only two meetings. When I asked what made him decide to try his hand at hybridizing, he joked "Well, I won everything there was to win at the rose shows, won Queen of Show in Jackson

for six years straight, I had to try my hand at something so somebody else had a chance to win."

He then spoke, almost half-heartedly, of the devastating year of 1989 when he bought a defective spray mixture from a large chemical company that resulted in the destruction of his entire hybrid tea collection of 17,000 rose bushes. "The more it costs you, the more you will remember it" he muses. These are the catastrophes that define a person's resolve and even though Whit was completely wiped out, referring to that year himself as "The Big Kill," he was not deterred and went on to begin hybridizing with miniature roses which would, serendipitously, lead him to unparalleled success in hybridizing a classification of roses that did not yet exist. Whit began our walk again and it was then that I realized he was not only gloveless, but there were no pruners on his person. As he walked, sharing particulars about whatever rose was in our immediate path, he reached out and effortlessly snipped off rose blooms between his bare thumb and forefinger presenting them to me for closer examination. A small bouquet was forming in my hands as we continued our walk.

Whit then began telling us about how he used to consider many of his early creations as "oddball" roses. He used to simply toss them away because the blooms were too big to be classified as miniatures, yet too small to be considered floribundas. However, he soon developed an appreciation for these unique roses and began planting them within the circular driveway outside his greenhouse. He had no way of knowing at the time that the ARS would later add a new classification of roses to its list and, as such, his "oddball" roses would now have a name... Minflora's. By the end of our first walk with Whit, the grin on my face was rivaled only by my beautiful bouquet of roses.. hand-picked by their hybridizer. Jim and I left with over a dozen of Whit's

roses that day and it was excruciating whittling our selections down to that number. But this was a good reason to plan a return trip.

Our next trip to Whit's wonderland would be a year later, but Jim and I were reluctant about contacting him for a visit having just learned he had broken his hip and was recovering from major surgery. He politely consented to our request to visit as we envisioned hospital beds, wheelchairs and a greenhouse full of neglected roses. Instead, as we pulled up close to his greenhouse, we saw his unmistakable figure maneuvering the pathways of his greenhouse with the aid of a walker. He seemed as occupied with his passion as ever and not at all inconvenienced by his dependency on the walker. Drawing from the inspiration of Sampson's hair, I wondered if the source of this man's strength was his roses. I asked when he had been able to return to them post-surgery. "Not until the day I came home from the hospital" he replied with a grin. "I tried to feel sorry for myself for a few minutes but that wasn't getting me any attention so I had to give it up and get back to work." Jim and I thought we should move slower to accommodate Whit's walker but oftentimes we found ourselves not keeping up with his pace.

Again, we walked the aisles of his greenhouse learning the stories behind the names of some roses and the relationship of family and friends for which other roses had been named. His rose "Shameless" was named such because in his opinion "that rose had nothing at all to be ashamed of", likewise "Best of '04" was in his opinion "the best rose of the bunch that year." There was also a very noticeable recurring theme where rose names reflected his enthusiasm for country music singers and/or their songs. Not surprisingly, the first rose Whit ever introduced was named "Elvis" in 1972. In this regard, Whit was, once again, ahead of his time since his custom of

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(Cont'd from page 4)

pairing rose names with the country music industry preceded Pat Bullard's dream child The Nashville Music Garden, now home to many of Whit's creations. As the daylight began to slip away, I asked Whit if the absence of lighting in his greenhouse was an overhead issue. "No" he replied. "I could never put lights out here because if I did, I'd never have a quitting time."

He applies this same practical approach to growing roses. "I only know what does and doesn't work because I tried things about every way there is to try". When asked, if like us, he learned by making mistakes, he just laughed, "Well, If something I do works, I brag about it. If it doesn't, I just don't tell anybody." He then surprised me when I asked what he considered to be the biggest myth about growing roses. "Water. I don't water my roses like other people do. Give them a chance and the roots will find the water. This makes for deep, strong roots". Despite three years of summer droughts, Whit has not watered the roses that are planted inside his circular driveway even once in those three years. Nevertheless, let me be the first to bear witness to their health and beauty. We left this visit with another healthy collection of Whit's one-of-a-kind creations and enough stories to write a book.

Our latest visit with dear Mr. Wells was the third Mother's day weekend in a row that we found ourselves in his greenhouse. In between customers he traced his rose roots back to his grandmother, Annie, who first introduced the future hybridizer to roses. She grew roses in an era when the only available methods were "organic." Her fertilizer consisted of cow and horse manure and her "spray" program was nothing more than spent wash water in which the main ingredient was lye soap. As Whit recalled

her beautiful roses, his youngest son, Alton, joined us at a table outside the greenhouse. More a vegetable gardener than a rose enthusiast, he still remembers being carted to rose shows at a very young age by his parents. Although Alton made it clear, more than once, that roses were not his "cup of tea" I noted while he was helping his father with customers that he certainly seemed to know the name and location of many of his father's roses. As he spoke about the types of vegetables he grows, it seems to be clear that he at least inherited his father's hard work ethic and love for cultivating things.

The only down-side Jim and I found of touring Whit's greenhouse is the frequency in which we would come upon a spectacular bloom and inquire about its name only to hear Whit utter, time and time again, "Oh, I haven't gotten around to naming that one yet." As such, these were roses he was not able to sell. He estimates that at any given time he will have 500 roses that are numbered and not named. Of course, every now and then he will wink and say "I can't sell you one, but I can give it to you". This follows a strict provision that we not share cuttings which is more than reasonable since doing so would be, as he calls it, "flat-out stealing" especially if he isn't receiving a royalty. It is one of the few times he speaks seriously and with conviction as this is the only negative aspect he has voiced about his passion. Well, that and having more roses than he has names for. Of course, he could take the advice of his oldest granddaughter, Samantha Ruth, for which he has named a rose: She thinks he should "name them all Samantha Ruth and just number them". Hmmmm, sounds like that petal didn't fall far from its rose.

I believe every rose garden needs a fair amount of Whit. For more information on how to sprinkle your rose garden with some of his magic, visit his website at www.wellsmidsouthroses.com

NRS Picnic Meeting

June 25th

At Sam and Nancy Jones' Garden

The NRS June meeting will be a picnic on Saturday, June 25th, 6:00 PM, at the rose garden of Sam and Nancy Jones in Bellevue (130 Belle Glen Drive, Nashville 37221). Besides their garden of about 175 rose bushes, the Belle Wood Glen Subdivision lake will be available for strolling. Sam and Nancy grow a variety of hybrid teas, climbers, miniatures, and old garden roses.

For the dinner, a ham and paper goods are provided by the society. Bring folding chairs, a potluck dish, walking shoes and insect repellent. Parking will be on the commons area beside the Jones' home, where the picnic will be held. Entry to the commons will be from Bellevue Road (between Old Hickory and Old Harding) in southwest Nashville, near Highway 100 and Percy Warner Park. Guests are welcome, as with all NRS meetings, and the Joneses are looking forward to seeing everyone there.



Photos courtesy of Sam Jones