

# Q&A

In her new book, *Rose*, journalist, author and broadcaster Catherine Horwood explores the complex but compelling nature of the world's favourite flower



**What led you to research the topic and what is your relationship with the rose?**

Garden history is one of my favourite topics and I was approached to write this book by Reaktion, the publisher. I thought I knew quite a lot about roses – I certainly do now! I've grown over 100 named varieties over the years without realising what an amazing history they have.

**Which were your most useful or unusual sources?**

Given the scope of the book – it looks at the place of the rose in everything from religion and royalty to poetry and perfume, not to mention its development through plant breeders – this is a tough question to answer. German rosarian Gerd Krüssmann's book, *The Complete Book of Roses*, was an invaluable starting point. The most unexpected was a delightful correspondence with enthusiastic paleobotanists in both America and China.

**How long did it take first to research and then to write the book?**

For nearly two years my life revolved around nothing but roses – morning, noon and often in my dreams at

night as well. Doing the research was a joy – after all, who wouldn't love hunting for paintings from across the centuries and meeting knowledgeable people who have devoted their lives to this flower family? Visits to rose gardens in France were particular highlights for me, but I will never forget being hit by the scent of roses on entering the little-known *Officina Farmaceutica di Santa Maria Novella* in Florence, where the nuns have been making rose water for over half a millennium.

**What are the earliest references to roses and where do they come from? And how old are the earliest specimens that have been found?**

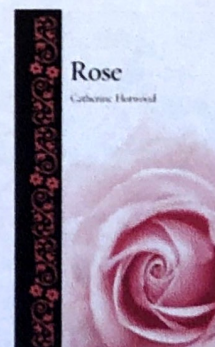
People are amazed when I tell them that rose fossils dating from 40 million years ago have been found in Colorado, and recently in China, which could be 25 million years old. Images from the early Minoan period depict roses, but the earliest dried specimens of rosebuds were found in an Egyptian tomb dating from around AD 170.

**What is it about roses, do you think, that has made them so compelling over the centuries?**

I think their attraction has a lot to do with their scent. Although there are incredibly beautiful roses that don't have any, it is a natural reaction to lean over and bury one's nose in the flower in expectation. Also, it is because the rose touches us at so many stages of our lives. We choose it to mark our most significant occasions – weddings, anniversaries, births and deaths – just as has been done across the centuries. It is really no exaggeration to call the rose the world's favourite flower.

**Is there a particular anecdote about a rose or rose grower of which you are fond?**

Collecting roses can be an obsession that transcends national boundaries, as it became with Empress Josephine (1763-1814). I love the fact that even at the height of the Napoleonic War in 1810, with French ports blockaded by the English, London nurseryman John Kennedy was granted special clearance to cross the Channel, not just to deliver new plants but also to prune her vast collection of roses at *Château de Malmaison* near Paris. ■



**Rose**

by Catherine Horwood,  
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