

George Thomson – Australian Breeder

By Toni Hains, Mt Gravatt East, Qld



Un-named seedling, picture taken at Ross Roses

“George’s wife complains she never has any flowers for the house. The minute a flower looks like blooming George runs out and rips off its petals”



Society Belle, 2008



Howard Florey

We had the pleasure of meeting George Thomson recently when we attended The World Rose Conference in Adelaide. George resides at Wilunga, which is 44km south of Adelaide. He is originally from Scotland (where he worked with well known rose hybridiser Alex Cocker.) George came to Australia in 1958 after completing an apprenticeship at Kew Gardens in London. He has been breeding roses ever since and is probably Australia’s most productive breeder.

George is the first to admit that rose breeding is somewhat of a lottery. “It is 40% know how and 60% luck and if lady luck is on your side you can produce something really special”, says George. As with any process, the more seeds you plant the better chance you have. George concedes that of 320 000 seeds you might end up with two good roses. That means being ruthless and having a good eye and lots of experience when culling the seedlings. The new rose plant needs to be strong and able to weather the tough Australian conditions – a trait George strives for in his breeding program.

So what process does George use to produce such roses as “Mawson” 2001; “Crown Princess Mary” 2006; “Onkapinga” 1997 and “Society Belle” 2008. “The first step in rose breeding is the selection of parents. It’s very important that you get that right” explains George. Each parent is selected for its genetic attributes. This could be the vigour of the growth, its flowering habit or reduced amount of thorns. Of course the major reason a rose would be selected as a parent is for its disease resistant qualities. This is particularly important for

roses grown in the subtropics of Queensland.

Once a parent is chosen George decides if it will perform the male or the female part of the partnership. George explains, “Each flower has got male and female parts. The male part is the part on the outside, those are the stamens, and the female part is in the middle.” Harvesting the pollen from the male stamens (by removing all petals to expose the stamen) makes the rose the “pollen parent” or the male of the reproductive cycle. The rose that is to be the mother or the “seed parent” will have the petals and the stamen removed. After this process George will pollenate it twice 24hrs apart with his chosen pollen. Then it is simply sit back and wait.

There is one draw back to all this removal of petals to prepare flowers to be a seed or pollen parent. George’s wife complains she never has any flowers for the house. The minute a flower looks like blooming George runs out and rips off its petals!!

Once the seeds have set and the hips have ripened George cuts open the hip and places the seeds in a box. “Now we

put them in the fridge. They’re a cold country plant, roses, and we chill the seeds for anything up to two or three months in the fridge, about 42 days, and it makes the seeds all come through at the same time”

George then plants his seeds in open top coolite boxes. While we were at Ross Roses (the nursery that represents George) we were shown these boxes full of 15cm high seedlings.



Each box measures about 50cm X 40cm and contained about 3000 seeds. All of the seeds in one box were the same two parents and George could have up to 10 boxes of the same cross. Promising seedlings are marked with a blue tag. When it is time to cull George simply up-turns the box into the garden and retrieves any plants marked with a tag. These are then potted up and will be culled again and again until he is left with two or three plants that he considers viable enough to go to market.

Rose breeding is definitely not for the faint hearted!!



George Thomson, centre with Paul and Toni Hains who attended the Centenary Rose Show and Convention from Brisbane.