



The Significance and Meaning of Roses

by Kathleen Karlsen

More than any other flower, the rose has been prized for its beauty the world over. Symbolic associations with the rose have existed since the days of the ancient Romans and Greeks. Roses have been identified with love and passion since those times, beginning with their association with the goddesses Aphrodite, Isis and Venus. Cleopatra is said to have received Marc Anthony in a room literally knee-deep in roses.

Wild roses have five petals. This has led to their symbolic connection to the wounds of Christ in Christian iconography. The rose also symbolizes the Virgin Mary herself, who was known as the "Mystic Rose."

There are fossil records dating roses back some 35 million years. Roses are native to the United States. Montana and Oregon have the oldest rose fossils. The rose has the most complex family tree of any known flower species with over 30,000 varieties.

Roses were first cultivated 5,000 years ago in Asian gardens. In the Orient, ladies carried rose petals in their purses and gentlemen made wine and herbal medicine with the flowers. Along with the name Orchid, Rose is one of the most popular names for girls in China. Confucius wrote that the emperor of China owned over 600 books on the cultivation of roses.

Roses were introduced to Europe during the Roman Empire and were thereafter used for ornamental purposes. Romans were known to carpet huge banquet halls with rose petals. Experts divide roses into two groups. "Old roses" are those cultivated in Europe before 1800. "Modern roses" have been cultivated since about the turn of the 19th century. Before cultivation, roses typically bloomed only once per year. Now roses are blooming somewhere every day of the year.

Over 4,000 songs have been written about roses. Roses are also the inspiration for everything from wallpaper to china patterns to fabric designs. Roses are a recurring theme in artwork, furniture, architecture and poetry.

Shakespeare mentions the rose at least 70 times in his plays and sonnets: "A rose by any other name would smell as sweet" (*Romeo and Juliet*); "Of all flowers, methinks a rose is best" (*The Two Noble Kinsmen*) and "When I have plucked the rose, I cannot give it vital growth again" (*Othello*).

Roses are emblems of England and New York City. Modern rose symbolism is intimately connected to the color of the flower. Red roses symbolize love, remembrance, passion. White roses symbolize purity. Pink roses symbolize happiness. The essential oils from roses used for perfumes are more expensive than the oils of any other flower. The rose is, indeed, the queen of all flowers.