

Meet: **Chris Warner**

Interview with Chris Warner, English rose breeder and creator of Persian “eye” roses.

Václav Koula

There are countries where people's relationship and love for flowers, trees and shrubs, and in a higher form for them in gardens, parks and in the wild, have long been an ancient and natural part of the living national cultural subconscious. Certainly one of the first places of such countries belongs to England and actually the entire British Isles. For centuries English botanists and gardeners have brought an inexhaustible amount of exotic plants to their country, growing and cultivating them here, many of which have become an integral part of today's gardens, and the English themselves are native and passionate gardeners. It is part of the traditions of England to have a nicely manicured green lawn, at least a piece of land near the house where you can plant a rose, cities and towns beautifully and diversely decorated with flower baskets and flower plantings, the countryside looking a bit like an English park – not to mention the famously beautiful English parks and private gardens themselves. At least that's how it is in our imagination, and I believe that despite the changes of time and people, this image still persists.

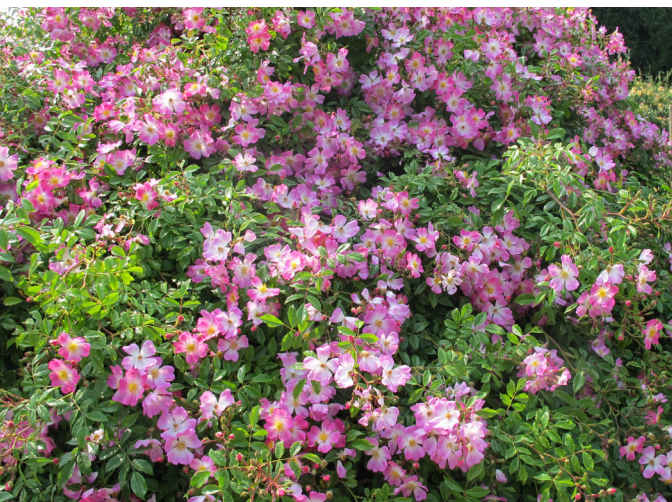
In many areas of gardening the English have left an indelible mark. Roses are no exception. In the last twenty years of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century four Chinese roses of uncertain origin derived from *Rosa chinensis* and *Rosa x odorata* were introduced to England. This was a fundamental turning point in the further development of roses, leading to the emergence of new roses during the first half of the 19th century, and then gradually to modern roses. The first tea rose called 'Adam' was created in 1835 in England, the very term "tea rose" is also derived from the English "Tea-Scented China Roses" abbreviated as "Tea Roses". And then specific personalities came along. Among the most famous belongs Henry Bennet, the "father of tea hybrids", an English rose breeder, the founder of the modern technique of crossing roses with planned pair selection and hand pollination. Later in the 1920s and 1930s creators of hybrids derived from *Rosa moschata*, the musk rose came, Reverend Joseph Pemberton, the author of the



Chris Warner between roses

still cultivated 'Penelope' from 1924, and his successor J. A. Bentall, the creator of such a famous rose as 'Ballerina' from 1937. And other famous names include Dickson and Harkness - breeding families continuing in rose breeding from the 19th century to the present. Of course, one cannot omit David Austin and the worldwide phenomenon of his concept of "English" roses, starting in the late 1960s and persisting to these days. But that's not the end. Another new and important chapter in rose breeding are roses derived from crosses with *Hulthemia persica*, the so-called Persian or "eyed" roses. Behind these stands none other than English breeder Chris Warner. We were fortunate here in Hradec Králové rosary that when I approached him a few years ago, he responded very warmly and gradually sent us a number of his beautiful roses for the competition. For the first time we could see "eye" roses, in their most original form but not only "eye". And they were undoubtedly beautiful roses, they won many awards, but above all the unequivocal admiration of the visitors to the rosary, but also of us "locals" in Hradec, and we are used to something beautiful in roses. For example, the Rose of the Year 2017 in Great Britain, the beautiful climbing 'Barbara Ann' (syn. 'Scent from Heaven') [Chewbaluv], the wonderfully fragrant, the most fragrant rose in our rose contest in 2020, or the absolutely perfect and elegant climbing 'Bold & Beautiful' [Chewhyteach] launched on the market in 2023, or the unmissable and challenging climbing eyed 'Peter's Persica' [Chewgoldeye]. We were also able to plant and grow the well-known "eyed" multiflora 'For your eyes only' [Cheweyesup] or the similar type 'Smiling Eyes' [Chewrocko].

Since Mr. Warner was always very friendly in email communication, and also very open and personal and I was also interested in how he got into roses and their breeding, and how it even happens that a person succeeds in crossing with a literally bizarre rose - I thought I could ask him about it. I suggested that I send him a few more general questions and he would answer them at his discretion, and also that I would like to publish his answers in the magazine of our Czech rose society and introduce him to rose enthusiasts in our country. Again, he was very accommodating and agreed. And not only did he agree, but he also sent the answers. I think they are again honest, personal, interesting and rare. They also show that even "eye" roses are far from the last thing that has been said in the world of roses.



'Scented Carpet' [Chewground] - 1994

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England is known as the promised land of gardening, and according to the general belief of Central Europeans (reinforced by watching Midsomer Murders :-) every English living in the countryside is more or less a gardener. However what was your personal journey to plants, flowers and gardening?

Most plants will grow in the UK plus usually we don't have to water so maybe gardening is easier in the UK, hence the continued interest. We have five or six, 30-minute gardening TV programmes each week in the UK. Thomas Proll has told me in Germany, they have only five minutes each week of gardening tv.

When did you become interested in roses and do you know why, and when did you become interested in their breeding? When did you start actively pursuing it?

Newly married, my wife wanted a cottage in the country with roses round the door. The realities of a teacher's salary meant an upstairs maisonette in Southwest Birmingham with a thin rectangle of garden at the front door. So, to please her I bought the first climbing rose I saw, 'Emily Gray', being assured it would flower in its first year. Of course, it didn't but I became fascinated by its growth and started reading rose books. I probably read nearly 50 books in two years and we acquired a few more different rose varieties. A move to Devon in 1968 gave us much more land and a lean-to glasshouse and the rose breeding started.

Early parent plants were 'Gloire de Dijon' and 'Sympathie'. An earlier visit to the Cotswolds had generated my major interest in climbers. A 100m boundary wall round a property smothered in climbing roses – one of the best sights of my life.

The Patio climbers were good fortune. I had a seedling 'Galway Bay' x 'Sutters Gold', which was orange (a great colour), but it only grew to about 2 metres. Crossed with 'Anna Ford', it produced 'Warm Welcome' and 'Laura Ford'. Both roses are still grown by several nurseries,



Typical architecture of the Cotswolds region of England.

and eventually considered a new type – a ‘patio climber’ – flowers from bottom to top approx. 2 metres up and across.

You are known as the creator of roses derived from crosses with *Hulthemia persica*. After many years it was a huge new contribution to the gene pool of roses and the creation of a whole new group of "eye" roses. When did the idea of getting involved in crossing this very special "rose" first come into your mind?

My interest in Persica roses was fired by Jack Harkness's talk at the World Rose Convention in Oxford, England in 1976. I told him afterwards it was like a fairy story coming true. I bought 'Tigris' soon afterwards and crossed it with 'Baby Love'. Twenty or so seedlings were raised, and they were nicknamed Tug, Tig, Tog etc! I shared some of the seedlings with members of the Amateur Rose Breeders Association (ARBA) and Ronnie Rawlings used a species-bred seedling from Len Scrivens (Scrivbell) - which was outstandingly healthy - to produce 'Belting Pink'. This hybrid was very healthy, very free flowering, had the persica eye, but the petal colour was the same as the eye, so you could hardly see it. But this rose, is in the background of nearly all my hybrids. So well done Len and Ronnie! It shows the benefits of co-operation in rose breeding. Chewsumsigns ('Raspberry Kiss' in the USA and 'Bright as a Button' in the UK & Europe) was first described as



'For Your Eyes Only' [Cheweyesup]

bullet-proof in the USA in terms of health and was indeed proved to have outstanding disease resistance. I remember my first view of it in the St Albans Rose Trials, flowering all over the plant. It was certainly different.



'Peter's Persica' resp. 'Shining High'
[Chewgoldeye]



'Looking Up' [Chewpopeye]

'For Your Eyes Only' was the next. UK Rose of the Year and it is particularly good in the RHS Wisely Gardens. 'Eye of the Tiger', healthy and free flowering, its distinctive, with a red eye in yellow petals. Today, 'Peter's Persica' or ('Shining High' in Europe), is our first persica climber, again with yellow and red. It's very healthy and I think quite different to any other climber. We are trying to get Persica roses in a full range of types, the work goes on.

You have created many beautiful roses, not just „eye“ roses. How do you approach breeding, how do you look for beautiful roses?

During my early years teaching in Southwest Birmingham, we like to escape to the Cotswolds, an area in England full of pretty villages, very keen gardeners and the delightful honey coloured stone properties which are a feature of the area. On one occasion my wife and I saw a 100-metre boundary wall of one house smothered in climbing roses, an absolutely amazing sight. From then on, climbing roses were my major passion. In my opinion, in all God's flowering kingdom there is nothing that matches a climbing rose in full bloom.

Do you have an idea of where else rose breeding could go?

My early successes were what the British call 'patio climbers' – growth to two metres, width, one metre, and flowers from bottom to top. We are now trying to breed very healthy patio climbers. Essentially a column of colour. We see fragrant repeat flowering ramblers as very desirable. 'Perfumy Siluetta' by Thomas Proll for Kordes is a delight.

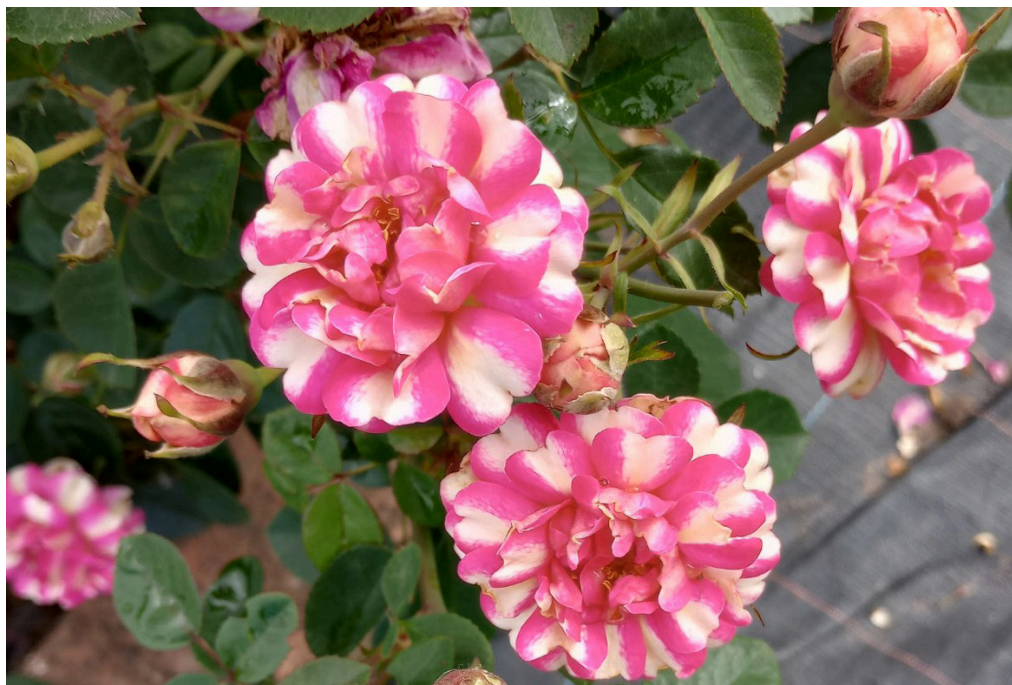
I would like to get a very colourful climbing rose, something that really shouts, 'here I am'. I think we are progressing, but not there yet. We would also like more fragrant climbing roses. We have some on the bench this year, but will they be healthy out of doors?

One of the great attractions of the rose is its huge diversity – anything from 12 cm to 20 metres. I see a great future for patio roses compact, colourful, free-flowering and healthy – a great bedding plant which will flower to compete with the annuals but will come back year after year.

Some of the breeders are now introducing species into their breeding. I was fortunate to attend a talk given by Ted Allen, the then Scientific Advisor for the Royal National Rose Society. He pointed out how few species had been used in breeding and that many fertile tetraploids were available. ARBA started a species breeding project in the 70's using *Rosa bella*, *Rosa davidii* and *Rosa davidii* var *elongata*. At first any hybrid achieved was considered a success and Colin Horner and Len Scrivens developed hybrids that have led to future successes and much improved health. I have worked with *Rosa sinowilsonii* (fabulous foliage) and continue with hybrids. Irish rose breeder, David Kenny had an award winner this year at the Rochfords International Rose Trials, bred from a Gelbert Engel x *R. sinowilsonii* hybrid seedling as a pollen parent.



'Alibaba' [Chewalibaba]



'Grain de Malice' [Chewsweetshop]

The future of rose breeding is not predictable. We are working on stable stripes, where every flower is like its neighbour – not random where every flower is unlike its neighbour. French rose breeder and grower, Christophe Travers, is introducing two of our striped roses this year under the name 'Grain de Malice', (chewsweetshop and chewsergent).

There is the opportunity to enhance the foliage e.g. 'Simsalabim' rose from Kordes, which has deep green, glossy and healthy leaves, and maybe some *Rosa glauca* type foliage. If we keep experimenting other changes will occur.

Besides roses, are there any other flowers that charm you? Why do we care about plants at all?

I admire nearly all flowers. Some of the new annuals are displaying incredible colours and flower patterns. The new flowers in the marquees at the shows are so much more interesting than today's modern garden designs, lacking colour with rusty buildings and grasses supposedly waiting for the wind to blow.

Thank you for the interview.

For more information about Chris Warner's roses, visit www.warnersroses.com