

Reinventing the Rose

David Austin married old roses with modern
hybrid tea roses to create the
now legendary English
roses that are hardy,
delicate but durable,
and oh so fragrant.

BY MEG RYAN

David Austin introduced a new type
of rose to the gardening world in
1961. Blooms shown here: 'Crown
Princess Margareta', 'Queen of
Sweden', 'St. Swithun', 'Eglantyne',
and 'Winchester Cathedral'.

GEORGIANNA LANE

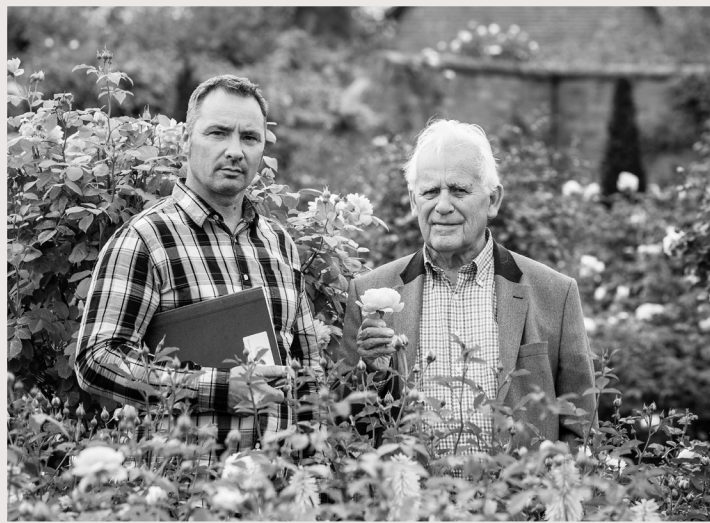
“THE COLOR AND FORM CAUGHT MY EYE, BUT THE FRAGRANCE STOPPED ME IN MY TRACKS. I HAD NEVER SMELLED A ROSE QUITE LIKE IT.”

While the progenitor of ‘Benjamin Britten’, ‘The Poet’s Wife’, and ‘Desdemona’ declines to name a favorite (“I’m rather like a parent who does not like to favor one child above another,” he says), others gush about theirs. And even they have trouble choosing a number one.

Paul Zimmerman, a rose grower and author in Campobello, South Carolina, prefers ‘Gertrude Jekyll’ for its antique rose scent, ‘Darcey Bussell’ for the crimson blooms. Don Johnson, a retired physician outside Tulsa, Oklahoma, who grows roses on his 1-acre rose garden, likes the bright apricot color and climbing ability of ‘Crown Princess Margareta’ and ‘Munstead Wood’ for its rich purple hue and “delightful” fragrance. “There are dozens more,” he says.

Suzanne Horn, a paralegal from Glendale, California, who grows hundreds of types for exhibition, prefers ‘Princess Alexandra of Kent’ (hot-pink blooms crowded with petals, rosy fragrance, and good disease resistance); ‘Fair Bianca’ (“perfect” bloom form, intense myrrh fragrance that has helped her win the fragrance class in rose shows); ‘Evelyn’ (“fragrance to die for” that inspired Crabtree & Evelyn’s rose product line); and ‘Golden Celebration’ (orange-gold hue, Sauternes-and-strawberry perfume to match). “I wish I could grow all the roses I love, but there is only so much room in the garden,” she says.

“For many years ‘Ambridge Rose’ was my favorite,” says Daniel Bifano, a landscape designer based in Santa Barbara and Montecito, California, who places hundreds of rose plants at a time on the properties of clients such as Oprah Winfrey, Barbra Streisand, and other



megastars. “Today, where I would have used ‘Ambridge Rose’ I now use ‘Carding Mill’. The disease resistance is the best I have found with excellent repeat, color that holds, beautiful flower form, and a very good depth of fragrance.”

Pamela Greenewald, a rose grower in Alachua, Florida, particularly likes roses with delicate apricot hues and strong fragrance: ‘Jude the Obscure’, ‘The Shepherdess’, ‘Ambridge Rose’. But she also has a soft spot, she says, for the romantic pinks like ‘The Generous Gardener’, ‘St. Swithun’, and ‘Spirit of Freedom’.

“I think one of my all-time favorites is ‘Lilian Austin’, with its huge, ruffly, deep apricot-pink flowers,” she says. But then again, there’s ‘Queen of Sweden’ with those delicate translucent pink blooms. “You see what I mean—not easy to choose!” she admits.

The one name behind them all? David Austin. Austin grew up in Shropshire, England, near the nursery of James Baker, the horticulturist best known for introducing

and popularizing the Russell lupine. Baker and Austin’s father happened to be friends. “I used to visit his nursery with my father, and this led me to believe that I might do something similar,” Austin says.

Once the plant breeding bug bit, Austin soon found his home in the rose. He pored over Edward Bunyard’s book *Old Garden Roses* and a number of modern rose catalogs.

“I came to the conclusion that the old roses were the most beautiful,” he says. They had glorious blooms of a seemingly impossible number of petals and grew in a riotous shrubby habit. “I purchased some of each kind and saw that this was indeed true. I was also aware that old roses were very fragrant.”



TIME IN THE TEST GARDEN

Left: David Austin (right) and Carl Bennett, the current head of breeding, frequent the rose test garden at the David Austin headquarters in Albrighton, U.K.

‘MUNSTEAD WOOD’

Below: This deep crimson rose grows on a hardy medium shrub that reaches 3 by 2.5 feet. It gets bushy, bears repeat flowers during the summer and fall, and has excellent disease resistance. Strong old rose scent that David Austin’s fragrance expert Robert Calkin calls “warm and fruity with blackberry, blueberry, and damson.”

BASKET OF BLOOMS

Facing page: A basket of ‘Sweet Juliet’, ‘Queen of Sweden’, and white ‘Winchester Cathedral’. ‘Sweet Juliet’ has apricot, peach, orange, and copper flowers on a hardy medium shrub that grows to 4 by 3 feet. Strong tea rose fragrance with fresh lemony notes.





‘TEASING GEORGIA’

This beauty grows to 4 feet when pruned as a shrub, up to 8 feet when trained as a climber; summer pruning will keep it at shrub height. The deep- to pale-yellow flower carries a classic tea rose fragrance.



‘CROWN PRINCESS MARGARETA’

Large, tidy apricot rosettes with a strong fruity fragrance to match. Known for its repeat flowering and strong arching growth. Grows to 5 by 4.5 feet as a shrub, 11 feet if trained as a climber. Ideal for the back of a border, and quite hardy.



‘PRINCESS ANNE’

Notable for its beauty and disease resistance. The flower transforms from a deep fuchsia to a lighter, lilac-tinged pink with narrow but abundant petals. It takes its time flowering. Grows to 4 by 3 feet. Excellent in a border or as hedging.



‘WINCHESTER CATHEDRAL’

Very hardy, very early flowering shrub that grows to 4 by 4 feet. Masses of pure white flowers bloom regularly throughout the summer. An old rose style in petal style and fragrance. Fragrance gets stronger in warmer weather; works well in a mixed border.

‘SOPHY’S ROSE’

No ordinary red rose: The light ruby petals of ‘Sophy’s Rose’ start small at the center and give way to large outer petals, making them look a bit like zinnias. Fragrance is that of a faded tea rose. Upright, bushy shrub reaches 3 by 2.5 feet with elongated foliage and twiggly growth. Use as bedding or hedging. Does well and will stay short in warmer climates.

‘REDOUTÉ’

This pale pink flower starts blooming early in the season, is free-flowering, repeats well, and has bushy, twiggly growth to 4 by 4 feet. The fragrance blends old rose, honey, and almond. It naturally stays compact and should be reduced by about half at pruning time.



‘HERITAGE’

Produces small sprays of dainty, ballet-slipper pink flowers softly fragrant with notes of fruit, honey, carnation, and myrrh. The rounded, nearly thornless shrub has pointed, gray-green foliage. Deadheading spent blooms will encourage repeat flowering, but if you don’t you’ll end up with a crop of healthy rose hips later in the season. Shrub grows to 5 by 4 feet, or grows to 7 feet if trained as a climber.

‘PAT AUSTIN’

Before ‘Pat Austin’, no English rose had color like this: bright copper on the inside of the petals, pale burnt yellow on the outsides. The large cup-shaped flowers have a strong, warm tea rose scent. The 5- by 5-foot shrub has an elegant arch and glossy leaves. Named after David Austin’s late wife. This shrub wants to grow, so it may need summer pruning, especially in warmer areas.

Our Most Beloved Rose

‘Graham Thomas’ was the result of a cross between ‘Charles Austin’, one of the early English roses, and a seedling from ‘Iceberg’, the well-known white floribunda. It was the former that probably gave the yellow coloring—although to be precise, it is more of an apricot color. As roses have such mixed backgrounds, it is sometimes surprising what colors appear. ‘Iceberg’ gave ‘Graham Thomas’ its ability to flower so freely.

It was appropriate to name this rose after Mr. Thomas, as he selected it himself. One of the great gardeners of the last century, he gathered a large collection of old roses and made them available to the gardening public. This gave us the opportunity to see how beautiful roses could be and what might be done with them. Thomas had been a good friend and source of information on roses, and he was instrumental in introducing our first rose, ‘Constance Spry’.

The ‘Graham Thomas’ represented a big change for us in the rose world. When we introduced it at the Chelsea Flower Show in 1983, the press wrote about

it extensively, and many of the visitors wanted to see this wonderful new rose and learn more about the work we were doing. The color is outstanding and the fragrance is delicious. It’s also not a hard color, so it mixes well with the other plants.

In 2009 ‘Graham Thomas’ was voted the world’s favorite rose by the World Federation of Rose Societies, which represents 39 national rose societies, and it received the James Mason Award from the Royal National Rose Society (RNRS) in 2000—this is why many know it as the world’s “most beloved rose.” The generous response has been encouraging, and I believe our continued work will bring even more beautiful flowers to market. —*David C.H. Austin, as told to Michael Marriott*



Rich yellow-blooming ‘Graham Thomas’ flowers early and often. Grows to 5 by 4 feet as a shrub, 10 to 12 feet as a climber (the preferred form). If grown as a shrub, prune in the summer.



CLIVE NICHOLS, RICHARD BLOOM

“IN THE END, SOME 10 YEARS WILL HAVE PASSED, AND 60,000 SEEDLINGS WILL HAVE BEEN WHITTLED DOWN TO THREE LUCKY FLOWERS TO BE CROWNED THE NEW DAVID AUSTIN ROSES.”

On the other hand, modern hybrid tea roses had their own advantages. At the time, breeders were coming up with new colors of flowers that had perfectly formed buds, often flowered several times per season, and produced a single perfect bloom for competition.

“It seemed to me that it might be a good idea to combine the virtues of each rose in one group or class,” Austin says. In addition to qualities of intense beauty and fragrance, the rose he was aiming for would also have a shrubby growth habit, high disease resistance, repeat flowering, and a wide color range. The result was the now legendary English roses, or, as they are commonly known, David Austin roses.

The immediate success of Austin’s first rose, ‘Constance Spry’, released in 1961, signaled that he was on the right track. It remains popular, “although it perhaps no longer deserves to be,” Austin says, “being very subject to disease and only having the ability to produce one crop of roses each year.” Fifty-five years later, ‘Constance Spry’ is joined by varieties like ‘Olivia Rose Austin’ (named after the grower’s granddaughter), one of the most disease-resistant roses of them all, and ‘Lady of Shalott’, which according to the David Austin catalog “will bloom with unusual continuity throughout the season.”

As for the scent of a David Austin rose? “I was introduced to my first David Austin rose about 25 years ago by my rose guru, the late Rayford Reddell at his farm in Petaluma, California,” Bifano says. “While in the garden

I came upon ‘Cressida’. The color and form caught my eye, but the fragrance stopped me in my tracks. I had never smelled a rose quite like it.”

David Austin rose varieties get scent descriptors like myrrh, lemon, clove, musk, apple, raspberry, black currant, peach, apricot, Old Rose (think rose water). We could be talking about wine or handcrafted perfumes, such is the range, depth, and complexity of fragrance in David Austin roses. In fact, these are some of the characteristics they’re specifically bred for.



‘ST. SWITHUN’

Huge flowers filled with more than 100 petals with a heavy myrrh scent. Free to flower and quick to repeat, this shrub (5 by 4 feet; will also climb to 8 feet) is known for its tough disease resistance.

Getting a rose from inception to a plant worthy of the name David Austin is a competitive process. First the selected plants are cross-pollinated to produce seeds. The following spring, the seeds are sown in trays in the

company’s propagation house. After these germinate, they go to the seedling house. Here, Austin says, “they flower remarkably quickly.” Eight plants of each seedling go into a trial garden for further assessment.

At this point each new rose becomes a contestant in a super slow motion beauty pageant. As the plants mature, the very best of each group of eight are hand selected for a final trial round. From those winners, about 200 more are grown the following year and tested for hardiness, form, shape, habit, color, fragrance, and a long list of other factors. In the end, some 10 years will have passed and 60,000 seedlings will have been whittled down to three lucky flowers to be crowned the new David Austin roses.

But above all, Austin looks for that ephemeral quality that makes a mere flower a David Austin Rose: grace. “The purpose of garden flowers [is] to provide us with beauty,” Austin says. “Those who take the task of breeding them should have this quality foremost in their mind.”

To continue the tradition and take on the responsibilities of the breeding program, Austin has introduced not only his son and grandson to the family business but also his protégé, Carl Bennett. “The work I am doing today will not come to light until after my death, unless I live to 100 years old! So I need a successor to see them through,” Austin says. Bennett came to work at the nursery some 20 years ago after finishing college and deciding that the plant world was where he wanted to be.

“I have learned many things [from Austin], particularly about

01 ‘GRACE’

An excellent variety with lovely pure apricot flowers that have a warm, sensuous fragrance. Here, it’s trained as a standard rose growing above ‘Port Sunlight’. This branching shrub grows to 4 by 4 feet.

02 ‘DARCEY BUSSELL’

Double bloom, medium shrub that grows to 3 by 2 feet. Austin calls this “one of the best and healthiest red roses we have bred.” Fragrance is fruity and grassy, and deep crimson petals flower freely and frequently.

03 ‘JAMES GALWAY’

This nearly thornless plant grows as a medium shrub to 5 by 3.5 feet or as a climber to 10 feet. Warm-to-pale pink flowers have a classic Old Rose scent. Disease free. Prune in summer to hasten repeat flowering habit.

04 BRIGHT IN ALBRIGHTON

The David Austin rose garden in Albrighton, U.K., bursts with color. Shrub roses include luscious red ‘L.D. Braithwaite’, deep pink ‘Lady of Megginch’, and creamy pink ‘Penelope’. Pale yellow to cream ‘Malvern Hills’ grows over an arbor.



01 02



MAKE YOUR

Rose Garden Grow

Conjuring a deliriously fragrant garden bursting with extravagant blooms doesn't take extraordinary knowledge or skill, but it does take a little patience—plus these four Ps from David Austin and other experts.

PLACEMENT

"I always prefer to see roses planted in groups of three or more of one variety rather than dotted around singularly. In this way they make a more definite statement which is altogether more satisfactory. [Plant] quite closely within a group so that they will eventually grow together to form what appears to be a single plant." —David Austin

"It is often desirable to include other subjects in a rose garden, but avoid anything too tall; it may swamp the roses. Choose a sunny site that's not overshadowed by other trees or shrubs." —Carl Bennett

PREPARATION

When it comes to soil: "Well-rotted organic matter is essential"—Carl Bennett.

"My rose gardens are organic, and in Southern California we have our share of fungus problems, so I shy away from disease-prone roses. We strengthen all of our roses with regular applications of compost tea. In fact, tea is all they use for the rose garden I installed at Ganna Walska's Lotusland in Montecito. Most notably, David's recent introductions tend to be more disease resistant and yet have intoxicating fragrance." —Daniel Bifano

PLENTY OF WATER

"I would say that the most important tip a rose fancier can have is to supply regular watering in dry periods. A rose is expected to flower repeatedly throughout the summer, and this takes a lot of energy, which it cannot get without adequate watering." —David Austin

PRUNING

"All shoots that are too weak or old to bear flowers should be removed. The remaining growth can then be cut back to about half its length." —David Austin

"Prune to about half its height during the dormant season. Thin out any weak shoots and dead wood. And during the flowering season, deadheading will encourage more bloom and maintain an attractive shrub." —Carl Bennett

DIGITAL BONUS: FOR A VIDEO WITH TIPS FROM DAVID AUSTIN ROSES, VISIT [GARDENDESIGN.COM/AUSTIN](https://gardendesign.com/austin)

‘EGLANTYNE’ (SOFT PINK)

Substantial, exquisitely formed pink flowers with a sweet, delicate perfume proliferate on a bushy, free-flowering shrub. An excellent all-around plant, 4.5 by 3 feet as a shrub, 6 to 8 feet if trained as a climber. Prune in the summer.

‘OTHELLO’ (MAROON)

Lives up to its name with massive, cup-shaped, deep scarlet flowers; proud, upright habit; classic old rose fragrance; and many, many thorns. Typically grows to 5 by 4 feet, but can become aggressive in warm zones. Keep it pruned.



GEORGIANNA LANE

‘LADY EMMA HAMILTON’ (SOFT ORANGE)

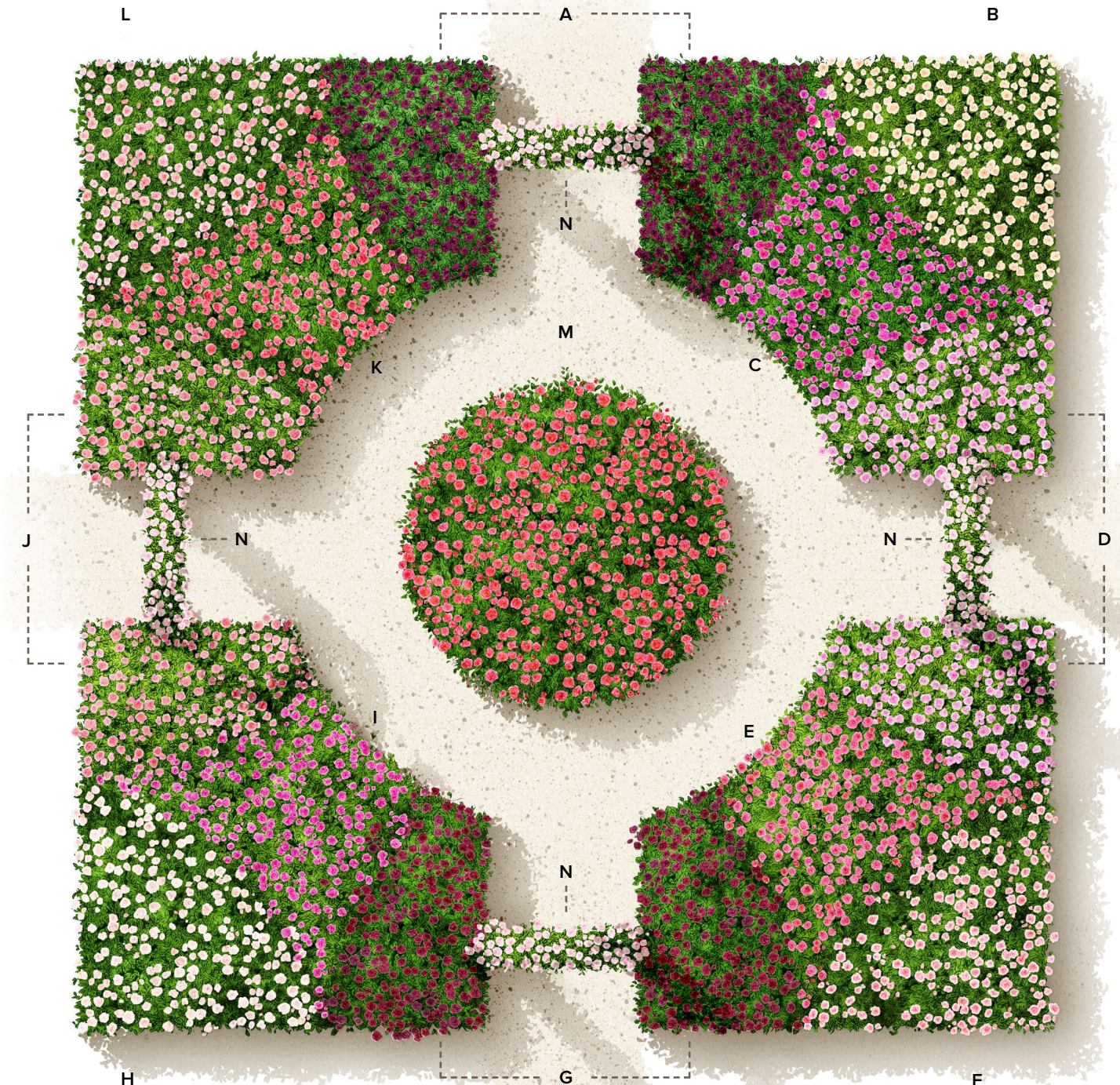
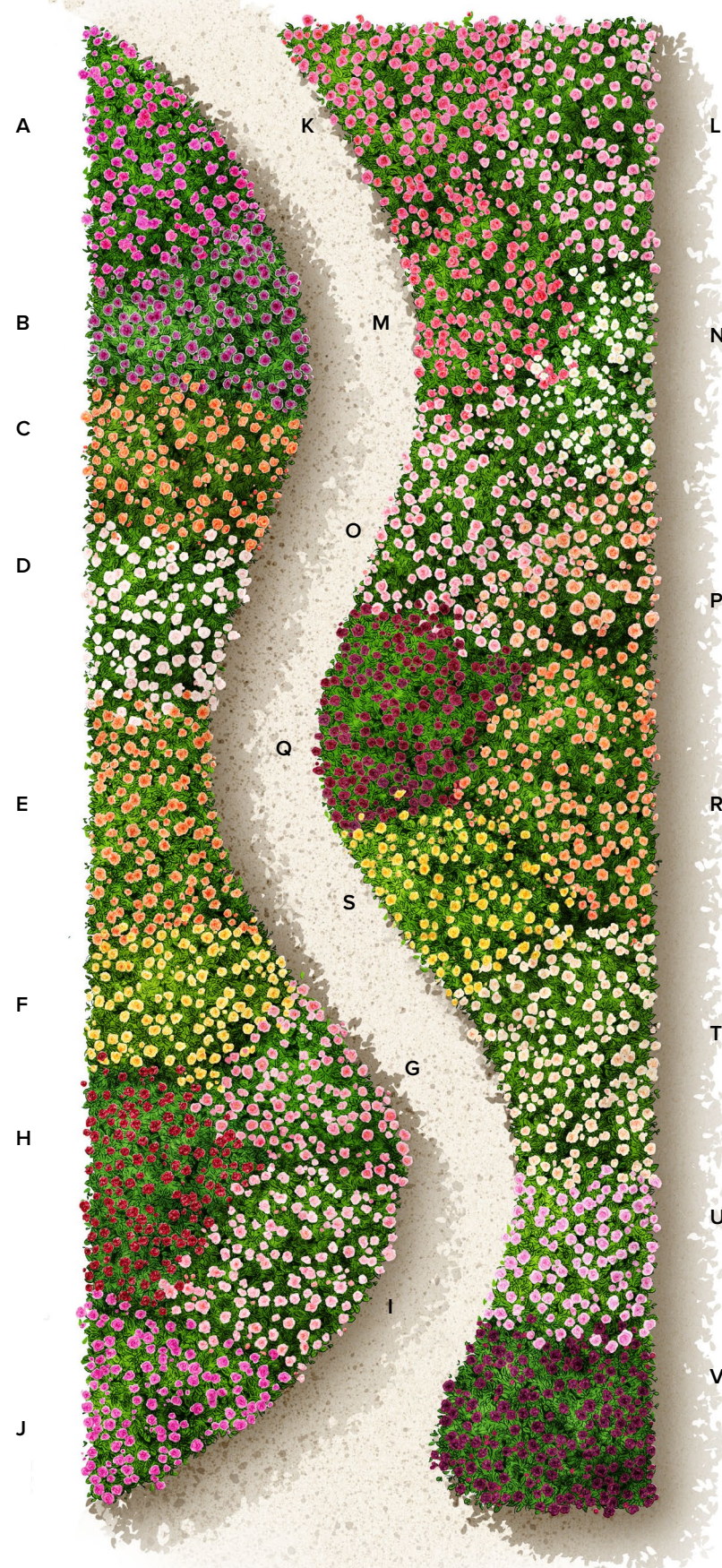
This robust bloomer is special because of its unusual orange color and strong perfume of pear, grape, and citrus. The medium shrub (4 by 3 feet) and bright color are great for jazzing up a border.

Design Like David

David Austin has been working with roses for more than half a century. These two plans, which Austin designed using some of his favorite varieties, showcase the stunning effect of planting roses in tight-knit groups. Planted this way, they weave together to form what seems like one large rose bush cloaked in color and fragrance.

A ROSY RAMBLE 40 BY 15 FEET

- A Princess Anne (3)
- B Young Lycidas (3)
- C Lady Emma Hamilton (3)
- D Desdemona (2)
- E Grace (3)
- F Graham Thomas (2)
- G The Alnwick Rose (2)
- H L.D. Braithwaite (3)
- I Queen of Sweden (3)
- J Gertrude Jekyll (3)
- K Princess Alexandra of Kent (3)
- L Scepter'd Isle (3)
- M Jubilee Celebration (3)
- N Tranquility (2)
- O Gentle Hermione (4)
- P The Lady Gardener (3)
- Q Darcey Bussell (3)
- R Lady of Shalott (4)
- S The Poet's Wife (3)
- T Lichfield Angel (3)
- U Olivia Rose Austin (2)
- V Munstead Wood (3)



RING OF FLOWERS 30 BY 30 FEET

- A Munstead Wood (10)
- B Lichfield Angel (8)
- C Princess Anne (9)
- D Olivia Rose Austin (10)
- E Princess Alexandra of Kent (9)
- F Gentle Hermione (8)
- G Darcey Bussell (10)
- H Desdemona (8)
- I Gertrude Jekyll (9)
- J The Alnwick Rose (10)
- K Jubilee Celebration (9)
- L Queen of Sweden (8)
- M Boscobel (center; 18)
- N The Generous Gardener (climbing; 2 per arbor)

"WE CAN ALWAYS THINK OF SOME FURTHER IMPROVEMENT THAT WE CAN MAKE TO OUR ROSES. WE HOPE FOR GREAT BEAUTY, MORE DELICIOUS SCENT, AND GROWTH THAT WILL SHOW OFF THE FLOWERS TO PERFECTION."

'QUEEN OF SWEDEN'

Facing page: Delicate peach-tinted pink flower with a musky light myrrh scent. The upright, disease-free shrub stays short (4 by 2.5 feet). Good for bedding, borders, or containers. Cut flowers last several days.

'BOSCOBEL'

Right, top: An exemplar of the English rose. The intoxicating scent blends myrrh, elderflower, pear, and almond. Upright shrub grows to 3 by 2.5 feet with healthy, shiny foliage.

'JUBILEE CELEBRATION'

Right, bottom: The salmon-colored, dome-shaped flowers are veined with a golden tone. Rosy scent has complements of citrus and berry. The 4- by 4-foot shrub grows vigorously and produces flowers freely and repeatedly through the season.

appreciation of beauty and attention to detail, which is so important in plant breeding," Bennett says. "All of the roses that we have developed have been a collaboration. We work closely together on what crosses to make and selecting which varieties are to go forward. The whole process of breeding a new plant is fascinating, so it is difficult for me to point to one particular area that fascinates me the most. Plant breeding is both challenging and creative—to my mind, a wonderful combination."

Through his patient dedication to the science, craft, and art of rose breeding, David Austin has inspired countless gardeners worldwide to celebrate and propagate the humble rose.

"Throughout his 90 years, David Austin has earned the respect and even reverence of all who share his passion for roses," says Pamela Greenewald. "He has not only created a new classification in roses, but he has brought together lovers of old roses and modern roses."

"I believe David has brought everything that is good about old garden roses to the modern rose grower," says Daniel Bifano. "Who would have thought of a rose that looks like an old garden rose that was also bright orange or hot yellow?" says Suzanne Horn. "He showed the gardeners of the world that a bloom doesn't have to look like a tulip to be a rose."

Don Johnson: "He has given the world a beautiful gift that keeps on giving. And a totally new philosophy for the rose world."

Ever humble, Austin is most proud not of his many accolades,



his appointment as an Officer of the Order of the British Empire, or the success of the business, but of the familial relationships he's built around horticulture—and of course the roses themselves.

"We have managed to work much of the charm of the old rose into our group of roses and often been able to go beyond them," Austin says, crediting his son David Austin Jr. and his grandson Richard Austin for much of the business's success. "And now we have three generations of the same family."

As for the future of David Austin Roses, it's a moving goalpost.

"We are very much on the edge of something new—new lines that we have been developing for many years are beginning to come to fruition, so this is an exciting time indeed," Bennett says.

That said, he underlines that the breeding program eschews seeking out specific novel characteristics. "Our main objective in breeding a new rose is to produce an aesthetically pleasing garden plant with such practical qualities as vigor, good resistance to diseases, and repeat flowering," he says. "Novelty simply for the sake of it is something we avoid."

"We can always think of some further improvement that we can make to our roses," Austin says. "I just hope that the foundation laid down will make this possible: great beauty, more delicious scent, and growth that will show off the flowers to perfection."

