

The Story of a Rose Garden and a Collector



Emanuele Dotti

[translated by Charles Quest-Ritson]

“What do I love about roses? Their colours, their scent, the way they hold themselves, the shape of their flowers, the leaves, the hips and even the prickles (some of them!).”

I have loved all plants ever since I was a child, when I worked with my two grandmothers in the garden of our seaside holiday home. As a teenager, I started to work a little harder and built up a small collection of camellias – I loved the perfect shape of the flowers and their elegant and composed bearing. In 2003, thanks to the arrival of a mail catalogue from an important Italian nurseryman, I discovered roses. I began to know them, admire them and study them, from which sprung a love and a passion that have remained unchanged to this day.

What do I love about roses? Their colours, their scent, the way they hold themselves, the shape of their flowers, the leaves, the hips and even the prickles (some of them!). In 2004 I started making a collection of roses in large pots and tubs on the terrace of my sixth-floor flat in Rome, growing the most important representatives of each class from ancient Gallicas to modern Hybrid Teas. After a few years of terrace-gardening, I had about 320 different species and hybrids, space was running out and the excessive weight began to worry my neighbours in the building.

So, at the beginning of 2009, I started to think about making a rose garden where I



Emanuele Dotti's garden at Magliano Sabina on 27 April 2022.



Image: Charles Quest-Ritson

“Every name tells its own story – it may be a portrait of a lady or just the promise of pleasure ”

‘Frau O. Plegg’
[Nabonnand, 1909] at
Magliano Sabina

Image: Charles Quest-
Ritson



could plant out most of the roses on my terrace. Work began in August 2009, at a family property in a hilly area near Rome. The land had not been cultivated for more than 20 years so we had to eliminate all types of weeds and work the land with agricultural machinery to a depth of about 50 centimetres (20 ins) to make it suitable for growing roses. During the winter of 2009, I began planting the first roses.

My passion for roses continued to grow day by day. I studied rose books in Italian and foreign languages, and I discovered that no other ornamental plant has such a complex and ancient history – the evolution of modern man could be told through the history of the rose. Every name tells its own story – it may be a portrait of a lady or just the promise of pleasure: the Gallica ‘Jenny Duval’ [c.1800],

Centifolia ‘Blanche Moreau’ [Robert & Moreau, 1890], Moss rose ‘Zoé’ [Forest, 1829], climbing Tea ‘Crépuscule’ [Dubreuil, 1904], Wichurana Rambler ‘Albertine’ [Barbier, 1921], Hybrid Perpetual ‘Yolande d’Aragon’ [Vibert, 1843], Hybrid Multiflora ‘Ghislaine de Féligonde’ [Turbat, 1916], Floribunda ‘Nancy Steen’ [Sherwood 1976], English rose ‘Constance Spry’ [Austin, 1961], polyantha ‘Edith Cavell’ [de Ruiter, 1917], Hybrid Tea ‘Ellen Willmott’ [Archer, 1935] and many more.

The obsession of which all rose-lovers – rosomanes – are victims is just like that of bibliophiles, so well described by Umberto Eco, the great scholar and lover of libraries. My rose garden is my collection. I see it as a library, where everything is rigorously catalogued and everything is represented by a different story – a different variety of rose. And, like a good librarian, I fantasise about the items that are still missing, hunting for roses, searching in catalogues, stalking them down in private gardens, finding lucky breaks, missing them by a whisker and then suffering from the frustrations.

It is so important for a collector to go on searching and never give up, which is why I say that bibliophiles and rosomanes share the same dreams and methods. The acquisition of another book or rose is always a step towards completing the collection. In my case, I aim to collect every old or modern rose still in existence, even those that have not been identified and named. People say

that collectors live longer than other people because their obsession keeps them active and defies the rules of ageing. ‘We and the labouring world are passing by’ says Yeats in his poem *The Rose of the World*, but the beauty lives for ever.

The first rose garden I visited was Prof Fineschi’s at Caviglia in Tuscany. I remember the date very clearly – 15 May 2010 – and the Professor had recently died, so unfortunately I never knew him personally. I made the visit in the company of my dear friend Claudio Cinti, who today supports and helps me in running the ‘Roseto Chilanti’, and with my dear friend Helga Brichet who, thanks to her experience and her extraordinary generosity, has given us many rare varieties to enrich our collection. I greatly regret not having met Prof Fineschi, but his garden continues to represent everything that he did for roses. It is an extraordinary collection, a ‘Sanctuary of Roses’. I do not deny that I would like to be able to equal his achievement.

The second rose garden I visited was that of Sangerhausen in June 2011. I was speechless in front of a profusion of roses that I had never seen in such quantity – and all arranged with great scientific rigour. In June 2012 it was the turn of the Roseraie du Val de Marne. The work of Jules Gravereaux is remarkable in terms of aesthetics and architecture as well for its roses. In June 2013 I visited the Rose Garden of Mottisfont Abbey in England, designed and planted by Graham Stuart Thomas whose

books *The Old Shrub Roses* (1955) and *Climbing Roses Old and New* (1965) had already made a great impression on me.

I hope that visitors to my own rose garden will see the influence of these extraordinary rose gardens and that they will visit it time and again, because a rose garden is always changing and must be re-assessed year after year.

It was a direct result of visiting extraordinary rose collections in Italy and abroad that I began to understand the importance of biodiversity. I realised that some varieties are present only in one or two collections and that they are in danger of being lost forever because their genetic heritage is unique and lives only within them. This prompted me to start making contact with other collections and their curators to replicate those rose varieties at risk of extinction.

We are currently propagating some of the roses from the ‘Gianfranco and Carla Fineschi Botanical Rose Garden’ thanks to the kind collaboration of Antonella, Cristina and Silvia Fineschi who have now been working on preserving the Rose Garden for several years. I began by making a careful study of all the specimens listed in the updated catalogue that the Fineschi sisters gave me. Then we began to propagate all those varieties present only at Caviglia or in countries where it is difficult to obtain exchanges of plant material. We have been working our way through in alphabetical order for about three years now and have arrived at the letter ‘I’ so far. Our relationship

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with the Fineschi sisters has a double value because, if the varieties we have propagated should be lost in their own rose garden, we will be able to propagate them and give them back again.

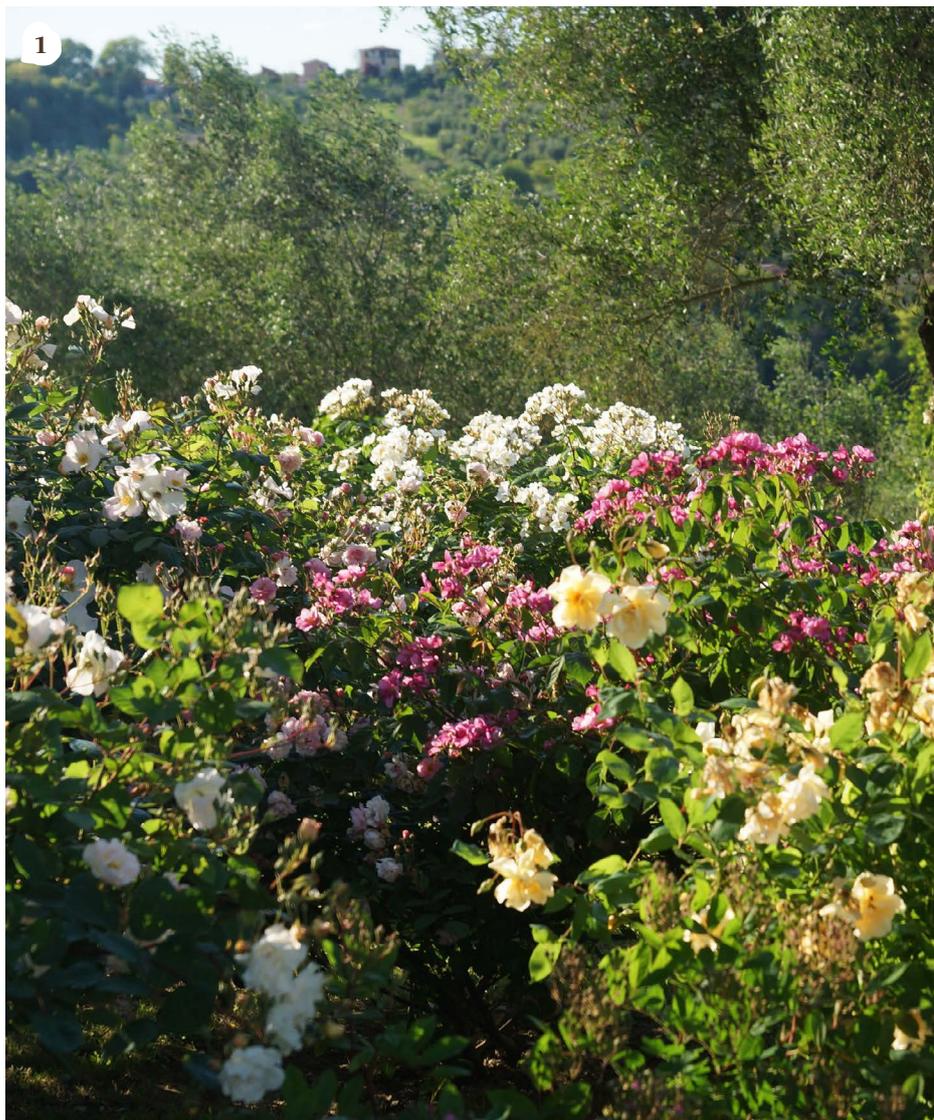
The Piccolo Roseto Giovanni Chilanti currently houses a collection of about 1,900 species and hybrids, which is constantly expanding. The roses are arranged according to their botanical classification with examples of all the hybrid classes.

The most numerous groups are:

- 124 species
- 175 Gallicas
- 184 Teas
- 89 China roses
- 54 Wichurana hybrids
- 49 hybrids of *Rosa gigantea*
- 220 Hybrid Teas.

The Rose Garden covers an area of three hectares (7½ acres) and is spread over three levels, which in turn are divided into seven sectors and thirty-two flower beds. There are also 45 olive trees that support the *Gigantea* hybrids and the great ramblers.

The Rose Garden, in addition to the roses, also hosts an oak-tree over



1. Emanuele Dotti's garden at Magliano Sabina on 4 May 2016
2. 'André Brichet' [DvP & Best Select, 2009] at Magliano Sabina
3. 'Clotaria' [Sanremo, 1936] at Magliano Sabina

Images: Charles Quest-Ritson



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150 years old, six pomegranates, two young specimens of *Pseudocycdonia sinensis*, *Salix* ‘Contorta’, *Halesia carolina*, *Paulownia tomentosa*, *Cercis siliquastrum*, *Xanthoceras sorbifolium*, *Koelreuteria paniculata*, *Parrotia persica*, *Liriodendron tulipifera*, *Acacia caven*, *Acer tutcheri*, *Chionanthus retusus*, × *Chitalpa* (a cross between a *Chilopsis* and *Catalpa*), plus some fruit and ornamental trees and herbaceous underplantings like irises and hemerocallis.

The rose garden is named after a deceased friend of mine, Giovanni Chilanti. Had I not met him, the Roseto would never have come into existence. We are planning a gradual but methodical expansion in the future, since we still have about 12 hectares (30 acres) of land available. What slows down the expansion is the increasingly difficult climatic conditions, with summer temperatures peaking now at 37-38C° and no rainfall for 3 or 4 months in a row.

In the spring of 2022, the garden was established as a non-profit association with the name ‘Associazione Piccolo Roseto Giovanni Chilanti’. The constitution stipulates that the Association will ‘carry out initiatives in the cultural and environmental sector with particular reference to the promotion and enhancement of the genus *Rosa* and the goal of collecting as many authentic specimens as possible for study and research’, while at the same time offering rose-lovers a living museum of rare beauty. We are also preparing a small Library Room where we can welcome visitors and hold themed meetings.

As many will know, keeping a rose garden and a large collection of roses today is a major commitment and, occasionally, we feel the weight of this responsibility, both financially and physically. On the other hand, it must be said that it does give immense satisfaction and that I would never willingly give it up. I was very happy when Charles Quest Ritson revisited us this spring and suggested that I should write an article about it for *BAON*.

At the entrance to Roald Dahl’s garden in England, there is a plaque that made quite an impression on me. It says:

‘Watch with glittering eyes the whole world around you because the greatest secrets are always hidden in the most unlikely places. Those who do not believe in magic will never find it!’

I hope that anyone who comes to visit my garden of roses will find beauty and perhaps even a little magic.

Emanuele Dotti is an engineer by profession and lives in Rome as well as Magliano Sabina, some 50 kms north of the Eternal City. He is one of a growing number of young Italians for whom the conservation of old roses has become a passion and a moral obligation.

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