

# History of Roses: Damask Roses

By Jerry Haynes

*Rosa × damascena*, more commonly known as the Damask rose or simply as "Damask", or sometimes as the Rose of [Castile](#), is a [rose hybrid](#), derived from [Rosa gallica](#) and [Rosa moschata](#) (Huxley 1992). Further DNA analysis has shown that a third species, [Rosa fedtschenkoana](#), is associated with the Damask rose (Harkness 2003). The Damask rose is commonly used to flavor food and to make [rose water](#) or a rose-scented essential oil.

## Description and History

The Damask Rose is a deciduous shrub growing to 7 ft 3 in tall, the stems densely armed with stout, curved prickles and stiff bristles. The leaves are pinnate, with five (rarely seven) leaflets. It is considered an important type of Old Rose, also, for its prominent place in the pedigree of many other types. Damask roses are renowned for their fine fragrance, and their flowers are commercially harvested for rose oil used in perfumery. The perfume industry often refers to this rose as the **Damascus rose**.

The Crusader Robert de Brie is often given credit for bringing this rose from Persia to Europe sometime between 1254 and 1276. The name refers to Damascus, Syria, a major city in the region. Other stories say the Romans brought the rose to England, and a third account says that Henry VIII's physician gave him a Damask rose as a present, around 1540.

## Uses for the Damascus Rose

For centuries, the Damascus rose (*Rosa damascena*) has been considered a symbol of beauty and love. The fragrance of the rose has been captured and preserved in the form of rose water by an ancient method that can be traced back to biblical times in the Middle East, and later to the Indian subcontinent. An Iranian doctor, Avicenna, is credited with the discovery of the process for extracting rose water from rose petals in the early 11th century. Damascus roses were introduced into England during the reign of Henry VIII and were frequently displayed and scattered at weddings and festivals. Nowadays, they are popular in craft projects and as potpourri ingredients. They are used in wedding favors, gathered together in organza bags or favor boxes, and they replace the traditional Avola sugared almonds to make perfumed keepsakes. They are also used to decorate festive tables and as hair decorations when attached to hairpins.

The uses of the dried Damascus rose in beauty products are numerous. Soaking Damascus rosebuds in water for three or four days releases a rose essence which can be added to bath water or may be used to rinse hair after shampooing to leave the skin and hair soft with the fragrance of roses. As the gentlest of all astringents, rose water is often used as toner for fair and dry skin or as an anti-aging product in facial creams. Damascus rose oil also has therapeutic properties that sooth the mind and helps with depression, nervous tension and stress.

## Culinary Uses

Damascus roses are used in cooking as a flavoring ingredient or spice (often to cover up the stench of rotting meat...) It appears as one of the ingredients in the Moroccan spice mixture known as Ras el Hanout. Rose water and powdered roses are used in Indian and Middle Eastern cooking. Rose water is often sprinkled on many meat dishes, while rose powder is added to sauces, yogurts and other desserts. Chicken with rose jam was a valued dish in Persian cuisine.

Western cookery today does not make much use of rose water, but Mediterranean cuisine still favors it, especially in such delicacies as rose petal jam.

### Varieties

Damask roses are divided in two groups (Huxley 1992):

- **Summer Damasks** (*R. × damascena* nothovar. *damascena*) have a short flowering season, only in the summer.
- **Autumn Damasks** (*R. × damascena* nothovar. *Semperflorens*) have a longer flowering season with some repeat; they are otherwise not distinguishable from the summer damasks.

**‘Summer Damask’** has a light pink bloom with flowers varying in color from almost white to dark pink. The bloom is loose and borne in small to medium clusters. There is a strong fragrance. The foliage is gray-green with 5-7 leaflets. It is a deciduous shrub growing to 7 feet tall, the stems densely armed with stout, curved prickles and stiff bristles. The leaves are pinnate, with five (rarely seven) leaflets. It is considered an important type of Old Rose for its prominent place in the pedigree of many other types. Hips are bright red and bristly. It is once-blooming.



**‘Autumn Damask’**

*Photo from*

<http://www.antiqueroseemporium.com/>

**‘Autumn Damask’** (*R. damascena semperflorens*) Prior to 1849. aka: (‘Quatre Saisons’, ‘Rosa Damascena 'Bifera'') medium pink with flowers borne singly or in small clusters. There is a moderate fragrance with some repeat blooming ability. The foliage is also light gray-green with 5-7 leaflets. This is the oldest European rose to reliably flower more than once. It is one of the most important historic roses, probably going back to the Romans or earlier. The buds are distinguished by the elongated sepals of the Damask, and the rose is at its loveliest when the buds are partially opened allowing the exquisite fragrance to be detected. This is a rose we remember from old chintz, hand painted china and wallpaper. This is quite probably the plant that writers in antiquity described as the Four Seasons Rose of Paestum. It is the only one of the Old European roses to repeat its bloom, and some rosarians have suggested that it is a species hybrid with ‘*R. chinensis*’, created where the far edges of their ranges touch. Its garden value is undeniable, with richly fragrant flowers occurring in abundance on a compact, hardy shrub in spring, followed by scattered blossoms through the summer and fall.



**'Mme Hardy'**

<http://www.rirs.org/tally2004.htm>

**'Mme Hardy'** is considered to be one of the most beautiful white roses ever bred. It is one of the finest surviving Damasks that we have in commerce, and for good reasons. It was bred by Alexander Hardy, an amateur rose breeder who was the chief horticulturist at the Luxembourg Gardens in Paris for many years. Of the many introductions bred by M. Hardy, approximately 10 are still with us today. The original name for this Damask was *Félicité Hardy*, named after M. Hardy's wife. It is thought that this is not likely a pure Damask, but possibly a Damask-Portland or Damask-Alba hybrid. It is easily identified by its unusually leafy sepals, and the characteristic green eye at the center of the bloom. There is a mild but very attractive scent to the bloom, one that I would describe as damask-like with an undertone of honey. I know that we all have a different sense of fragrance when it comes to roses, and many people describe the scent of 'Mme Hardy' as being strong and very sweet. The foliage is a lovely fresh grass green on straight upright canes with modest thorns. It will grow to a height of about 7 feet and is a modestly vigorous shrub and very healthy. It does get some blackspot on occasion, but only under very stressful weather conditions. 'Mme Hardy' is one of the classic Old Roses. Though not very large, the blooms begin as pretty cupped shaped form, then becoming flat and finally reflexing. There is the slightest hint of blush in the early stages, but later they become a pure glistening white, while at the center, a small green eye adds to the attraction.

**'Ispahan'** is another still popular example of *R. damascena*, before 1832. Also known as 'Rose d'Isfahan' or 'Pompon des Princes', this paragon amongst Damask roses has been seen growing wild on the hills of Iran. [David Austin](#) still recommends it highly as free flowering, among the first [Old Roses](#) to start blooming and the last to continue, and for its fine Damask fragrance. The name *Ispahan* is from the name of the city of [Isfahan](#) in [Iran](#).



**'Ispahan'**

Photo from

<http://www.antiqueroseemporium.com/>

*Thanks to Paul Barden's website "Old Garden Roses Beyond" at <http://www.rdrop.com/~paul/history.html>.  
Next month we will discuss the Alba roses.*