We like to visit gardens as we travel, and there are many that we visit again and again, including our own Denver Botanic, which is a true gem. So it was with great anticipation that we added David Austin’s nursery and display gardens in Albrighton, Shropshire to a family vacation planned for Scotland in early June.

Some twenty-five years ago, I became enchanted with the old garden rose/modern rose crosses coming out of England called Austin Hybrids, and we have amassed a collection of 52 varieties of these, some of which are on the top of my “Best Roses for the Rockies” list. I would guess that we have tried and discarded another score more, most of them for a failure to thrive, or even to live through a winter in our challenging climate. But ah, the ones that remain! They are the staples of our rose life: ‘Abraham Darby’, ‘Graham Thomas’, ‘Evelyn’, ‘Jude the Obscure’, ‘Teasing Georgia’, ‘St. Cecilia’, ‘Sharifa Asma’, and on and on, most of them in advanced old age in an aging garden. How would they look in their native English habitat? What could we learn there of benefit to their culture in Colorado?

Well, of course, they looked spectacular—even when not in bloom. In fact, probably only a fourth of the reputed 700 varieties in the display gardens were in flower on May 31st. It was enough. And we observed much that high-country gardeners can use to advantage.

Our first impressions were formed right out in the parking lot where a rail fence was planted with larger Austin varieties. The names on the name tags were familiar, but the greater size of the blooms and the richness of their colors were remarkable enough that our cameras started clicking with the very first bush, which happened to be ‘A Shropshire Lad’, which is light pink with apricot overtones in our garden. Austin’s plant carried true apricot blooms that were half again as large as any we have grown. The reason of course is that we garden at altitude, and our persistent sun bleaches out bloom colors, especially as temperatures rise. The low relative humidity in our climate, and our harsh winters result in smaller plants and relatively smaller blooms. The milder, cloudy and cool English climate, with its more diffused light and higher humidity, produces the same colors and bloom size one would expect to see in the USA’s Pacific Northwest.

It also produces aphids—thousands of them, and not just in the parking lot. The entire two-acre display garden boasted the largest population of aphids that we have ever seen in any garden anywhere. Enlarging all our photos on a computer shows aphids on every plant. The conclusion to draw is that these display gardens are not sprayed, nor are the plants hosed down. Of course, it had just finished raining and had been raining there for days before we arrived, and perhaps control is not so easy in such a large space.

Our next impression, as we walked toward the entrance, was that Austin uses walls and tall evergreen hedges to form micro-climates which allow the roses within to grow to outsize proportions. Each of six display areas is thus protected from the worst that weather can throw at a plant. They are essentially very large, roofless rooms which allow in sun and rain, but which cut wind damage and desiccation sharply. To apply the same concept in our area involves planting our roses on the south and east sides of our homes and fences, thus providing protection from Canada’s “blue northers”, our cold, northwest, winter winds. Not many of us have the luxury of a completely walled garden, but we can certainly bring more wood through the winter by optimum siting.
Upon entry through the gate, we found ourselves in The Patio Garden, which features Austin specimen roses in large terra cotta planters set on pea gravel next to a walkway of pavers. We saw ‘Anne Boleyn’, ‘Princess Alexandra of Kent’, ‘Golden Celebration’ and ‘Desdemona’, among others. They provided beautiful and fragrant interest to the entrance and sales area. Small Austin Hybrids with rounded, shrubby growth could be container-grown in high country gardens as focal points in the landscape in the same manner. However, in our climate, the containers would have to be taken into a garage or other protected place for the winter. Having grown roses in containers for many years, I can relate that doing so is not for the faint of heart, as winter storage is hard on both the rose and the gardener. Roses over-wintered in this way still require light, water and insect and disease protection, and go into the following spring in a diminished condition. The life span of our container roses was about five years. Alternatively, a container rose could be enjoyed for the summer and planted into the garden in the fall. We have been experimenting with the fall planting of potted roses in our garden with success, provided that the rose has a developed root system, is removed from the pot with its root ball intact, and is properly mulched and hydrated through the winter.

From The Patio Garden the visitor can enter either The Lion Garden or The Long Garden. We chose to enter the former and return through the latter.

The Lion, sculpted by David Austin’s late wife, Pat, is the focal point of this garden, immediately visible upon entry. The Lion is just one of Mrs. Austin’s sculptures in the display gardens, but it is the piece that is used to the greatest effect. A wide grass path runs straight through an allee of blooming topiary rose trees to the reclining beast, which is resting in front of a wall covered with, fittingly, a planting of ‘A Shropshire Lass’ flanked by two plants of ‘A Shropshire Lad’. It is a touching tribute to the marriage that produced the world-renowned commercial enterprise operating just behind the wall. That commercial enterprise is engaged in savvy marketing; those gorgeous topiaries featured in the Lion Garden are for sale in the extensive rose nursery behind the garden center building. In a smaller space, they would be focal points in themselves.
In landscape design, "focal points" force the viewer's perspective to a particular location. Such focalization gives a garden a sense of purpose and order, without which a landscape is just a careless collection of plants and other objects. Specimen plants or hardscape features such as arbors, fountains, yard art or large containers can be used to serve this purpose. In the high country, our gardens are out of bloom five or six months of the year, making it imperative to incorporate features to provide interest through the winter. This is one of the reasons to plant large, hip-producing, hardy shrub roses, such as albas, rugosas and Canadian Hybrids. We have a large specimen of ‘Rosa Canina Inermis’ anchoring the circle in front of our home. In winter, it is covered in large, red hips which persist into spring when daffodils bloom beneath it. Every year, strangers knock on our door to ask its identity. I have often thought of removing it, as it requires the cutting of long, heavy, old canes annually, but so far, its use as a focal point for seven months of the year has saved it from destruction.

From The Lion Garden, we passed through a side entrance into The Renaissance Garden, and found ourselves under timber-topped stone pillars featuring Austin Hybrids trained as pillar roses. Varieties which would lend themselves to this use in Front Range gardens include ‘Teasing Georgia’, ‘A Shropshire Lad’, ‘Graham Thomas’, ‘Cressida’ and ‘Jude the Obscure’. Here, it is ‘Teasing Georgia’ that steals the show, and we spent some time sniffing the blooms at nose level before moving on.

The Renaissance Garden is to my mind the most beautiful of the gardens and is devoted exclusively to Austin’s roses. The garden is essentially a demonstration garden, showcasing the Austin roses available for sale in the nursery, with their wide range of flower types, fragrances, growth habits and relative sizes. In Austin’s books, he recommends planting smaller varieties in groups of three or more to form a larger display. It is The Renaissance Garden that demonstrates the stunning effect such planting can have. Here the rose groups are planted in a chain of semi-circular formal beds edged with boxwood along a reflecting pool, and the effect is one of stunning formality and restrained lushness—putting one in mind of a lusty Renaissance mistress tightly laced into a frothy gown. Most of the varieties used are in groups of five to seven and more, and again all are varieties that are available for sale. Few of us have the space that this type of planting requires, and boxwood is only marginally hardy in my garden, but oh, the drama!

Conceptually however, we could edge a lawn with a low hedge using one variety of rose for a mass effect. For this to be successful, the rose used should have a fast-repeating bloom cycle, and glossy, disease-free foliage. Years ago, I had forty red rose bushes planted along two split rail fences bordering our yard. They were there when we bought the house in 1972, and I was never able to determine the variety. They carried clusters of vivid, semi-double blooms continually during the growing season, were self-cleaning, and did not require spraying. They were spectacular in bloom, although I never fertilized.
In other words, they were the perfect hedge rose. Some ideas for hedges today might include ‘Olivia Rose Austin’, ‘Lady Elsie May’ and ‘Fire Opal’, a Kolourscape® rose from Kordes, all of which are hardy, full, floriferous and pretty even when not in bloom. Austin recommends ‘Darcey Bussell’. http://www.davidaustinroses.com/us/david-austin-darcey-bussell-english-hedging-collection-10-roses

On we went to The Victorian Walled Garden, a formal garden made up of three circular borders, which diminish in width towards a central sculpture. These beds, even the widest, provide easy access to the roses within from either side, a boon when fertilizing and weeding. Planted with English Roses and other repeat-flowering shrub roses, the garden also contains several stone carvings by Pat Austin, including that of a woman with a wide garland of roses wound around her hips, a perfect vision of Summer herself. This garden features Austin climbers and ramblers trained over arches, arbors and along the eight-foot-high wall which encircles the garden, a micro-climate creating feature that ensures that the long canes will survive winter’s desiccating winds. We can take advantage of the idea by planting our climbers and ramblers on walls or fences which are sited between our roses and our prevalent northwest winter winds. To reiterate, your home is an effective windbreak.

Tucked into a corner behind the Victorian wall is The Species Garden, containing a collection of true species (wild) roses and their near hybrids. This garden would be one of the first to flower in spring, and the bloom was mostly over at the time of our visit. After flowering, hips develop on species roses that are in full color by fall, attracting birds. We in the Rockies can use species rose hips to extend color in our gardens from September through the winter into April while providing winter food for our feathered friends. Too, rugosa roses generally produce fat hips the size of some cherry tomatoes. These can be harvested, dried and used for rose hip tea, which is very high in Vitamin C, and a comfort to drink if you should happen to catch a cold.

Having toured down one side of the Austin property, we returned through The Long Garden, the largest of the gardens, which inhabits the whole other side. It contains a collection of old garden roses which flower once in early summer, modern shrub roses from other breeders, and of course, many Austin Hybrids, including older varieties. Again, all are available for sale in the large nursery area. The Long Garden is interlaced with pergolas, which divide the somewhat over-
The Long Garden is interlaced with pergolas, which divide the somewhat overwhelming expanse into rooms, a concept long used by garden designers. The pergolas provide support for many climbing and rambling roses. A large sculpture provides a focal point at the far end.

By this time Jerry was ready for a break, so off he went to the Tea Room, while I wandered around the nursery area. A high level of marketing expertise was plainly on view, with the current best-selling roses all grouped on tables with photos of the roses in bloom. Also on view were clay planters, topiaries and table after table of roses grown in the fields and greenhouses on the property. It was impossible to sort through them all. It was also impossible to purchase any to take home, so I had to content myself with making a list of roses to order. I did pick up a copy of the English version of Austin’s catalog which differs from the American one in available varieties. It’s a souvenir to page through on a winter’s day, recreating the gorgeous gardens created by the talent and dreams of David and Pat Austin.