

## **THE BEST OF THE OLD AUSTIN HYBRIDS**

By Carol Macon, Master Rosarian

This is the time of year we start dreaming of spring and evaluating possible additions to our gardens. If we're thorough in our research, we must consider our climate. And no doubt about it, Colorado summers are getting warmer. Temperatures in the 90's and water rationing can take their toll on our roses. The Austin Hybrids, bred in English conditions of cooler, rainy weather, and from old garden roses, seem to suffer when the temperatures soar, more so than hybrid teas, but not as much as the old garden roses from which they were bred. On the plus side, there are those Austin varieties that can take the heat, notably the yellows, such as 'Graham Thomas'. The rest eventually perk up, reaching their annual best, when temperatures cool in the fall. All Austin Hybrids are fragrant; it is one of the attributes for which they are bred. Many have retained heavily-petaled, old garden rose shapes. However, all Austin Hybrids are not created equal, and it seems to me that some of the older varieties are better in form, fragrance and habit than many of the newer ones. What follows is a list of my favorite older Austins, and notes on their culture. Included are a list of others we grow successfully in our USDA Zone 4b/5a garden, and a list of some Austin varieties we have removed from our garden with the reasons for doing so.

### **'ABRAHAM DARBY', 1985.**



Abraham Darby is widely available by mail order, and over-winters well on the Front Range. Its cupped blooms are peach-pink and very full; it is strong, vigorous, and free-blooming when kept deadheaded. This is a must-have rose for fragrance, with a fruity perfume reminiscent of peaches. It can be grown as a freestanding shrub that will easily grow to six feet high and wide when grown in a protected location in full sun, which it requires to be at its best. On a south or east-facing wall it can be grown as a climber and will reach eight feet. To grow it as a climber, limit it to five strong canes, and deadhead routinely. If you are growing it as a shrub, a mature plant will benefit by being cut back hard—by about a third—after its first flush of bloom. This will assure strong stems for the second bloom cycle. 'Abraham Darby' does better than most when temperatures soar, although the blooms will be smaller

than normal. Its blackspot resistance is only fair; in a rose garden, plant it near disease-resistant varieties. The blooms of a young 'Abraham Darby' will nod; as the canes get stronger, so will the plant's ability to hold up its flower heads.

### **'EVELYN', 1991. Pronounced EVELyn.**



I first saw (and sniffed) 'Evelyn' at the American Rose Society's spring national show in Denver in the 90's, and that heady experience launched me on a two-year search for a source of this rose. When I finally found 'Evelyn', I bought six plants, so afraid was I that I would lose them. Four of these are still alive and happy in Colorado Springs, and we have since added two more. They bring their exceptional beauty and intense fragrance into our lives every year. The two 'Evelyn' that died were unfortunately planted where they received only four hours of sun a day; they grew weakly and finally did not survive a winter. I have since read that this Austin Hybrid is known for its intolerance of shade. The four original survivors are planted out in the open garden and annually reach the proportions of a hybrid tea—about three feet tall, and eighteen inches to two feet wide. Dis-budding will produce four to five inch rosettes of peach/apricot with yellow centers, but the clusters of bloom are good also, even when temperatures climb. In the fall, a cluster of Evelyn can (and did) win Best of Show. Regular deadheading is necessary, and Evelyn will sulk if pruned back too hard. Disease resistance is fair. This is one of the best Austins for small gardens, and another of my "must haves." Obviously.

### **'GOLDEN CELEBRATION', 1992**

Slightly more golden than the yellow blooms of 'Graham Thomas', 'Golden Celebration's' three and a half inch blossoms hold their color well in the heat, but tend to fry at the edges in temperatures over 90 degrees F. Its foliage, however, tends to burn in hot afternoon sun, so



'Golden Celebration' would probably do best in an eastern exposure. It is very hardy, unusual for a yellow rose, and has good resistance to blackspot, that scourge of yellow roses. It can be kept to the size of a hybrid tea, and has good repeat bloom when deadheaded as one would a hybrid tea. 'Golden Celebration' would be a good choice for anywhere 'Graham Thomas' is not hardy, as the flower form is similar. It is hard even for judges to see any difference, although the cupped blooms of 'Golden Celebration' are slightly deeper and have more petals, than those of 'Graham Thomas'. It has a tea and fruit scent, and its new canes are nearly thornless. 'Golden Celebration' is slow-growing on its own roots, and in Colorado, will only attain a height of three to four feet. It is a winner of the Royal Horticulture Society's Award of Garden Merit.

### **'GRAHAM THOMAS', 1983**

'Graham Thomas' was designated the World's Favorite Rose for 2009 by the World Federation of Rose Societies. It is also a winner of the Royal Horticulture Society's Award of Garden Merit.



Among the most popular of the Austin Hybrids, 'Graham Thomas' is hardy here when protected from the north and west, preferably by your house. It will then, if adequately fed, oblige you by sending up slender six to ten-foot canes with two cycles of buttery yellow, fragrant, ethereal bloom produced in terminal clusters each summer. Training the canes laterally can increase the amount of bloom. This rose has good blackspot resistance for a yellow rose, and mildew is not an issue. I have tried three; the one in the open garden died, as did one in our zone 6 front wall corner, which reached twelve feet before being utterly destroyed in the winter of 2014. We have had the third since 1994 on a south facing wall right under the kitchen windows. It is an unfailing treat to the senses every summer. Grow it if you can. Its breeding is 'Charles Austin' x (seedling x 'Iceberg').



#### **'HERITAGE', 1984**

'Heritage' is a rose of understated elegance, and it is often overlooked. The photo of it on the David Austin website does not do it justice, in my opinion. It was the very first Austin I ever grew, and I was enchanted with its strong honey and myrrh fragrance, as with the clear, shining, shell pink of its blossoms. This is a paler rose in Colorado at our altitude than in England, and the blooms are more open. Bees love it. It has a tall, narrow habit, and in a protected location, would probably perform well as a pillar rose. Disease has not been a problem for it in our garden, and it is completely hardy. Seedling x 'Iceberg'.



#### **'LEONARD DUDLEY BRAITHWAITE', 1988**

Hardy and healthy, 'Leonard Dudley Braithwaite' will grow to about five feet tall by four feet wide. Its four-inch rosette blooms have a true crimson/red color, which will age to a red/pink in heat. The blooms will not fade to mauve, and they are stunning in arrangements. This rose needs to be well-fed to bloom well. It tends to not want to bloom when temperatures climb, but its spring and fall production is very reliable, and although it may die back in zone 4 winters, it will come back strongly. Disease resistance is very good. 'Leonard Dudley' is named for David Austin's father-in-law.



#### **'LILIAN AUSTIN', 1973**

When newcomers visit my garden, the color of 'Lilian Austin's' flowers is sure to be mentioned. It is unique, made up of salmon, copper and pink, with hints of yellow. The flowers are four inches across and informal in character with bright gold stamens. The fat buds are tomato red, and you will get three bloom cycles, at least, of this display every summer. The plants are low and tend to spread; they are best in the front of a border. Foliage is dark green and highly disease resistant. 'Lilian Austin' is hardy and can take the heat. This rose was named for David Austin's mother—and yes, it is spelled with one l. It is one of the oldest Austins we grow. Unfortunately, it appears to have been dropped from the Austin website and is otherwise hard to find online. Thankfully, Help Me Find says that High Country Roses carries it. Thank you, Matt Douglas! So get 'Lilian Austin' while you can and if you can; this is too fine a rose to disappear from commerce.

#### **'OTHELLO', 1986**

Tall and rugged 'Othello' was, at one time, one of the top five best selling Austin roses. Sadly, it is no longer carried in the Austin catalog or on their website, and it is getting hard to find. David Austin has written that "Othello has been superseded by better varieties." I would like to know what varieties he is talking about, because there is no other Austin like this one. I suspect 'Othello' does better in our climate than in his. Immediately recognizable, 'Othello' produces opulent, 5



inch, full, dark crimson/red blooms, cabbagey in form, that age to purple. As the blooms turn purple, they become infused with noticeable hints of orange, yellow, pink and silver. These striking blooms sit atop long, strong, upright canes, making 'Othello' perfect for a back-of-the-border position. It could also be used as a pillar rose in a protected location against a wall. It is at its best displayed with shorter, lighter varieties in front of it, because its lower leaves will be very coarse and sparse by summer's end. This rose must have a full day of sun. In a wet summer, you may have to remove a few mildewed leaves; 'Othello' inherited that tendency with its purple coloration. This is

another Austin that will come back reliably year to year. Ours are over 20 years old and going strong. 'Othello's' blooms do very well in rose shows. Don't refrigerate them; just cut at the half-open stage the day before the show.

#### **'ST. CECILIA', 1987**

The patron saint of musicians, St. Cecilia, is well represented by the charm and purity of this rose's blush pink blossoms. It is one of the finest Austin Hybrids. For all its delicate beauty, though, it is also one of the most hardy and vigorous. I find that by pruning it back hard (by about a third) to 3' x 3' or so in early spring and again after its first bloom cycle, it will produce masses of classic -cupped, long-lasting, uniquely-scented roses all summer. Its scent, a heady mixture of myrrh and damask rose, is immediately identifiable and sets it apart. One blossom will perfume a room, and St. Cecilia's blooms will last four to five days in a vase. This rose routinely wins "Most Fragrant" in shows, placing it right up there on my must-have list with 'Abraham Darby' and 'Evelyn'. 'St. Cecilia' is resistant to black spot. Remove any mildewed leaves that happen to appear. Find it while you can and plant it where you can place a bench nearby, because this rose will add much to your quality of life.



#### **'TEASING GEORGIA', 1998**

Heavily-petaled and heavenly-scented, 'Teasing Georgia' should be far more popular a rose than it is. Perfect for novice rose gardeners, it is incredibly easy to grow. Plant it and stand back; 'Teasing Georgia' will do the rest. It matters not if we forget to fertilize; out in our open back garden, her canes shoot up to six feet. They must be staked to prevent wind damage while they are producing large, golden yellow blooms with perfect rosette form and a strong tea fragrance. The foliage is highly disease-resistant. Had I known how easily this rose puts on height every spring, I would have planted it against a wall and used it as a climber—it gets too wide for a pillar. We usually get three bloom cycles from 'Teasing Georgia', unless the growing season is cut short by an early frost. This is another winner of the Royal Horticulture Society's Award of Merit.



Austin, Jude the Obscure, Lady Emma Hamilton, Lady of Megginch, Lucetta, Mary Rose, Morning Mist, Pat Austin, Pegasus, Perdita, Redoute, Sharifa Asma, Summer Song, Tamora, Tea Clipper, The Dark Lady, The Ingenious Mr. Fairchild, The Pilgrim, The Shepherdess, The Squire, and Windrush. All are hardy at 6100 feet of elevation, at least somewhat disease resistant, perfumed to one degree or another, and most of all, beautiful. They are not all equally productive or vigorous. Charles Darwin and

Other Austins residents in our garden are ‘A Shropshire Lad’, ‘Ambridge Rose’, ‘Brother Cadfael’, ‘Carding Mill’, ‘Charity 97’, ‘Charles Austin’, ‘Charles Darwin’, ‘Charlotte’, ‘Cressida’, ‘Crocus Rose’, ‘Eglantyne’, ‘Falstaff’, ‘Geoff Hamilton’, ‘Gertrude Jekyll’, ‘Heathcliff’, ‘Huntington Rose’, ‘Jayne Austin’, ‘Jude the Obscure’, ‘Lady Emma Hamilton’, ‘Lady of Megginch’, ‘Lucetta’, ‘Mary Rose’, ‘Morning Mist’, ‘Pat Austin’, ‘Pegasus’, ‘Perdita’, ‘Redoute’, ‘Sharifa Asma’, ‘Summer Song’, ‘Tamora’, ‘Tea Clipper’, ‘The Dark Lady’, ‘The Ingenious Mr. Fairchild’, ‘The Pilgrim’, ‘The Shepherdess’, ‘The Squire’, and ‘Windrush’. All are hardy at 6100 feet of elevation, at least somewhat disease resistant, perfumed to one degree or another, and most of all, beautiful. They are not all equally productive or vigorous. ‘Charles Darwin’ and ‘Falstaff’ are living on borrowed time.

Less-than-vigorous ‘Bredon’ and ‘Country Living’ got lost in our perennial border; when found, both went to good homes where they were planted by themselves. ‘St. Swithun’ outgrew its space, sending out 8-foot canes in the middle of our hybrid tea bed. It too, went to a good home. Looking back, I should have recognized that I was seeing a mis-registered climber, and simply transplanted it against a wall. Once-blooming ‘Constance Spry’ and its red sport, ‘Chianti’, are no longer in our garden because they produced little or no bloom in the process of taking over our yard. ‘Charmian’, ‘Claire Austin’, ‘Emmanuel’, ‘Ellen’, ‘Fair Bianca’, ‘Happy Child’, ‘Molineux’, ‘Port Sunlight’, ‘Redcoat’, ‘The Nun’, and ‘Winchester Cathedral’ did not survive a winter. ‘Fisherman’s Friend’ didn’t survive a winter twice. None were the least bit vigorous. Yellow ‘Charles Austin’ (a sport of Charles Austin) had very little bloom. Ditto ‘William Shakespeare 2000’ and ‘Sophy’s Rose’. ‘English Elegance’ was a sparse re-bloomer. ‘Proud Titania’ balled when it wasn’t swooning with mildew, which was most of the time. ‘Christopher Marlowe’ also balled. I never saw a decent bloom on it. I tried slow-growing, slow-blooming ‘Prospero’ twice, because its bloom is stunning; the rest of the plant was hopeless for me. ‘Tradescant,’ with similar growth problems, is also gone. ‘Mayflower’ stayed very small. It had a thick tangle of thin, wiry stems and produced nondescript blooms. It just wasn’t up to par.

This brings me to the issue of age. Michael Marriott, the technical director and senior rosarian of David Austin Roses, is on record as saying that when the Austins in your garden reach the age of twenty, they should probably be replaced. It is true that in many rose varieties, flower production declines after ten or twelve years, and by twenty, many simply don’t attain their former height and width; therefore, bloom production is a fraction of that of a young plant of the same variety. This is true even if the gardener has not neglected to fertilize them. At this point, such plants are simply not worth their upkeep. Some of the Austins we planted in 1994, the first year of our current rose garden, reached their peak performance in 2008, and have not been as prolific since. This is not true of any in my top ten or of others we grow. I think it is because whenever possible, we purchased plants on their own roots. The flip side is that own root roses often are slower-growing than their budded sisters.

The culture of Austin Hybrids is like that of other modern shrubs. In spring, plant them in full sun and enriched soil with a small handful of triple phosphate one inch below the bottoms of the planting holes. A top dressing of Mile Hi Rose Food and two to three inches of water a week under three inches of mulch will keep them happy; more fertilizer is up to you. Some patience is needed while they establish themselves; they normally take three to four years in the ground to mature to full production, during which time you might try to refrain from doing much pruning. Remove dead wood only.

After your Austin Hybrid is three years old, find a height you are comfortable with and prune the shrub to the strongest canes in the spring. In our climate, winter may make your pruning decisions for you. Often, all you need to do is remove dead wood. Austin generally recommends pruning of a MATURE shrub by a third in the spring of the year. I find this to be a very loose guide, as the pruning needs of his offspring differ, often widely. Evelyn, for instance, hates to be cut back at all at any time, so I let winter-kill do that job for me initially. The only other pruning of ‘Evelyn’ occurs when I cut her blooms for the house. Then she sulks and is very slow at sending new growth off the pruned cane. The more pliable of the taller Austin varieties, when not grown on a wall, can be pegged in the open garden to produce more bloom. So, if you are into pegging, you may want to just let the canes grow. Ditto if a tall Austin is trained horizontally along a wall. ‘A Shropshire Lad’, ‘Charles Austin’, ‘Cressida’, ‘Eglantyne’, ‘Graham Thomas’, ‘Jude the Obscure’, ‘Leonard Dudley Braithwaite’, ‘Othello’, ‘St. Swithun’ and ‘Teasing Georgia’ will behave like pillar roses or climbers in sunny, protected situations.

We do not spray for either insects or disease. We wash aphids and spider mites off with a hose. If we can tell a bud is infested with thrips, we remove it from the garden immediately. Prompt dead-heading also helps to keep thrip and beetle populations down. Many Austins are disease resistant to some degree. Check the catalog descriptions of those you wish to order; if disease resistance is not mentioned, the plant is not disease resistant.

In our garden at 6100 feet above sea level, we do not winter protect our roses. We plant deep, and we mulch. Budded Austins are planted with the top of the bud union three inches below the surface of the soil. Austins on their own roots are planted with the tops of the roots two and a half inches down. Even if winter takes the bush to the ground, we’ll have two inches of cane ready to send up basal breaks in the spring when the mulch is pulled back. These are the depths that are also recommended for cold winter areas on the David Austin website. If the plant dies completely, it is not hardy to our zone 5a garden. With rare exceptions, we will not try that variety again.

2016’s newcomers to our garden, ‘Olivia Rose Austin’ (2014), ‘The Fighting Temeraire’ (2011) and ‘The Lady Gardener’ (2013) look promising, with ‘Olivia’ being a very heavy producer and highly disease resistant. For 2017 we have ordered ‘Boscobel’ (2012), ‘Lady of Shalott’ (2009), and ‘Munstead Wood’ (2007). All one hundred fourteen Austin rose varieties sold in the USA are specially selected for American growing conditions and climate zones and are grown and shipped within the USA. All are products of a breeding program that has become more aware of the importance of disease resistance in roses than it used to be, and the Austin website has begun to list the disease resistance of each variety they sell.

Have a look at the offerings shown on the David Austin Roses website <http://www.davidaustinroses.com/us/> for ideas. It is a beautiful website and can get you dreaming of England if nothing else, but Austin roses are widely available at other websites as well. The other websites are good places to find off-patent, own-root Austin varieties. David Austin has been good over the years in dropping production of early Austins that may have had hardiness and disease issues. The older varieties that do appear in current catalogs and on websites have stood the test of time. It is best to place your order in the fall of the year through the following January to be sure of getting what you want. Some local nurseries carry limited selections of potted Austins, often already in bloom.

If you are bitten by the Austin Hybrid bug, a wise purchase might be David Austin's illustrated book, "David Austin's English Roses". More than a guide to his favorites of his creations, it includes excellent chapters on his breeding program and on cultivation, with planting and care advice from the Master himself. It has been revised three times since it first appeared; I find all three editions helpful, as we still grow older varieties that have been dropped from the latest edition. They're beautifully illustrated and fun to curl up with on a cold winter's night.

Try some Austin Hybrids if you haven't done so. The best of the Austins will reward your care and patience handsomely. (Photos © various websites, David Austin Roses and Amazon)

