Growing Roses in Iceland

By Vilhjálmur Lúðvíksson

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(Unless otherwise noted)

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Table of Contents

Preface 4

A late start 5

Natural occurrences of roses in Iceland 8

Challenge of climate and Hardiness – or "tenacity" of roses! 10

Problems of the soil 14

The Rose Club of The Icelandic Horticultural Society 15

Activities of the Rose Club 16

Club activity - Procurement of roses 16

Three rose gardens established 16

Nordic and international rose cooperation 19

The Nordic Rose Society 19

The Nordic Rose Weekend 2012 in Iceland 23

The World Federation of Rose Societies 26

Canadian connections 27

Canadian roses in Iceland 30

The Roses 35

Experiencing the hard way 35

What about our own rose breeding? 40

Jóhann Pálsson 42

Breeding "New Icelandic" roses! 46

Preface

This article was written as the contribution of Iceland to the project of a *50 year anniversary book* for the Nordic Rose Society in 2023. It was initiated in 2021 by then chairman of the society, Svein-Oddvar Osen. For various reasons this ambitious publication did not materialize.

I had completed the intended contribution of the Icelandic Rose Club to this book by October 2022. I therefore find myself owing to the community of Nordic rose-lovers in the respective membership societies the opportunity of reading about the Icelandic experience with growing roses - and how we have benefitted from the Nordic cooperation in this area.

The article gives some background on the Nordic inspired evolution of gardening interest in Iceland. That begins with the pioneering influence of the Danish born medical doctor Hans G Schierbeck (1847-1911) who was appointed Director of National Health in Iceland 1883. He had, alongside his medical training, been student of botany and professional gardening. He founded and became the first president of The Horticultural Society of Iceland in 1885. That initiative was to him an import element in improving the access to healthy diet through home grown garden produce among the Icelanders. He started efforts to find plant varieties able to thrive in the challenging conditions of the Icelandic climate. He was also instrumental in finding and inspiring a capable student, Einar Helgason (1867-1937), to train as a gardener in Denmark and become the first professional and an important leader in that field. Einar was the first Icelander to write about roses in his informative books about gardening.

As the Icelandic Rose Club hosts the Nordic Rose weekend 2025 it is appropriate to dedicate this digitally published article on *Growing Roses in Iceland* to the memory of both Hans Schierbeck and Einar Helgason - and the continued Nordic cooperation about the growing of hardy roses for the challenging climates of *The North*.

April 2025
Vilhjálmur Lúðvíksson

A late start!

Roses in Iceland! There is something of a contradiction in the concept of growing roses in Iceland! Yet, that is exactly what we are doing - or at least trying! And trying it is – both with success and some failures - but lately some success. And we were the last to join the Nordic Rose Society- formally in 2008!

Compared to our Nordic relatives Icelanders are latecomers to gardening for pleasure and ornamental purposes. Only a few individuals attempted such gardening before the end of the 19th century. The political history and the economic state of the country certainly did not encourage such activity until well into the 20th century.

The Icelandic Horticultural Society (IHS) was however founded in 1885 by a group of pioneers led by the Danish born medical doctor Hans G Schierbeck (1847-1911) who had been appointed Director of National Health in Iceland 1883. He had been a student of botany and served apprenticeship in gardening before and alongside his medical training. The medicinal properties of plants were still an important factor in medical practice of his time. He became keenly aware of the need to promote gardening as a public health measure in his function as the top medical officer of Iceland. The IHS under his leadership therefore initially focussed primarily on the growing of edible garden products with limited attention to ornamental plants.

The oldest ornamental tree in Reykjavik planted by Dr. Schierbeck.

Dr. Schierbeck, however, established for himself a plant nursery at the farm Rauðará on the then outskirts of Reykjavik. He also got permission to cultivate a relatively large garden inside the walls of an ancient but discontinued cemetery linked to the National Cathedral of Iceland at the centre of Reyk-

Hans G. Schierbeck.

javik. There he experimented with ornamental trees, shrubs and perennial plants he imported or started from seed. He reported his results and recommendations in small booklets written in Icelandic that became the prototype of later publishing activity by the IHS, notably it´s still going Annual Magazine (Garðyrkjuritið). One of the trees he planted in the ancient cemetery was a Swedish Whitebeam, *Sorbus intermedia,* which is the oldest imported tree still living in Iceland. It now has many descendants in Icelandic gardens.

Dr. Schierbeck was also responsible for the recruitment and early training of the first formally educated Icelandic gardener, Einar Helgason, and arranged for his further training in Denmark. Upon his return to Iceland in 1899 Einar was hired as a national advisor on gardening by the newly formed Agricultural Association of Iceland where he remained active until 1918. He then established his own nursery in Reykjavik and also took the lead to reorganise the IHS for the promotion of gardening - including ornamental gardening. He became its director and main driving force from 1920 to his death in 1935. He travelled extensively in Iceland in this period to lecture and give advice on gardening and arranging for the distribution of seed ordered through the IHS. He wrote three books on the main lines of gardening. One was dedicated to the subject of edible plants. Two of them gave some information on the subject of growing roses. He did not consider growing garden roses realistic except as indoor plants or by overwintering them inside, possibly because the experience with the garden varieties available at the time showed they did not survive the local climate. He suggested rugosa species roses might survive in the Icelandic conditions which subsequent experience has proven correct.

Interestingly enough one of the early varieties of imported garden roses that a few ladies in Reykjavik experimented with already in the 1880´s was a rose that made history, - the epoch breaking ´La France´ introduced to the world in 1867. It was grown in pots on windowsills inside living rooms and seems to have done well, probably thanks to the limited insulation and well aerated inside climate of houses of that period. It could be seen flowering on the south side by single glass windows of some Reykjavik family homes at this time. With no local nurseries or florist shops around, their fascinating, scented flowers became sought after and were sometimes sold at the front door of such homes as decorations for weddings, confirmations and even funeral services! Remarkably ´La France´ has been propagated from the same original plants uninterrupted since this time. It is still kept alive to this day by ladies who are conscious of the historic value of this rose and fascinated by its enticing scent and beautiful flower form.

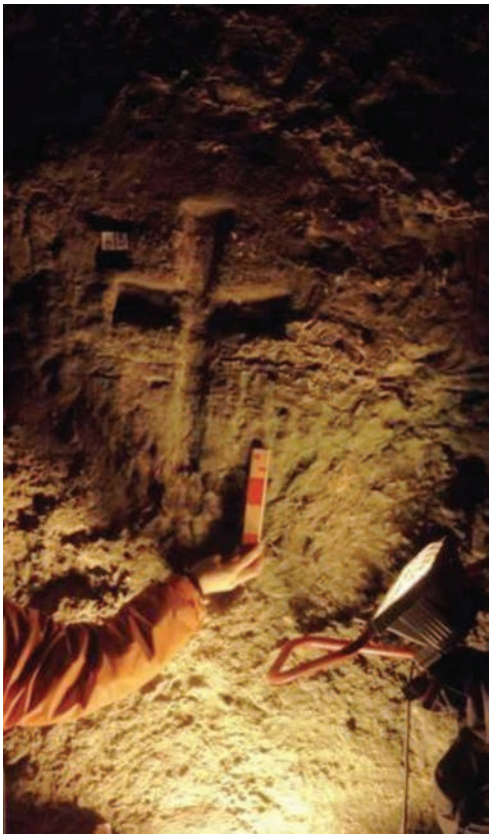
Some major steps to encourage ornamental gardening were taken by local governments after World War II, linked to rapid economic growth and a major build-up of modern housing developments and local planning in various parts of the country. A Horticultural College had been established in 1939 at Reykir in Hveragerði which started professional training of gardeners which gave an impetus to the development of gardening culture in Iceland. A new generation

'La France' maintained over 120 years from its original imports.

of educated gardeners, many of them Danish borne, established nurseries in the post-war period and imported garden plants, including roses. Some local production of garden trees and shrubs started as well as annual flowers and perennials. Garden roses were generally imported from Denmark since outdoor propagation by budding was not realistic in Icelandic cold and short summers and production by rooting cuttings was considered slow and unreliable. At this time roses gradually became available in the market but success in growing them was quite limited because the varieties offered for sale were not really suitable for the Icelandic environment and knowledge of their requirements very limited. Enthusiastic gardeners tried their best but most of them resigned to look at roses as difficult plants, blooming only for the summer they were bought and possibly another two or three years but gradually fading away. The most dedicated growers accepted the need to replace them after they deteriorated, just to enjoy their spectacle while they lasted, much like cut flower roses. Indoor production of cut roses in geothermally heated greenhouses started and thrived in this period - as it still does - and possibly has kept alive the desire to grow them as garden roses.

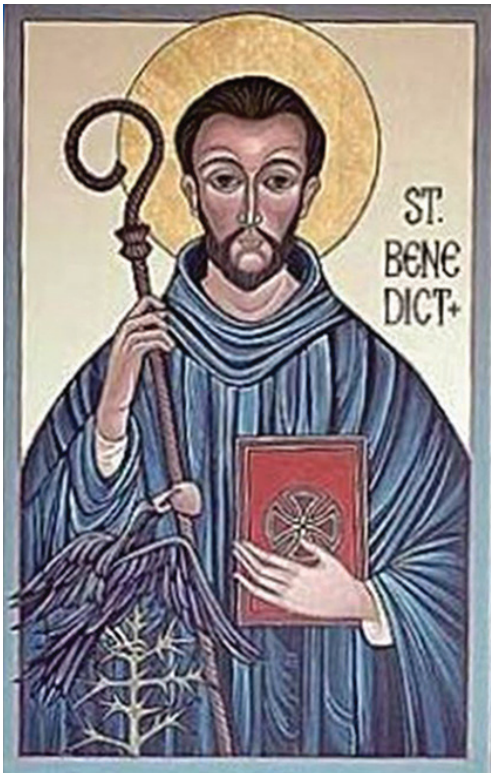
Natural occurrences of roses in Iceland

There are two species of roses occurring naturally in widely distant and isolated spots in Iceland. The Scotch rose or burnet rose, *Rosa spinossissima* grows in 6 or 7 locations and the glaucous dog rose, *Rosa dumalis* subsp. *dumalis* in one location only. Preliminary DNA studies indicate that there is only one genotype in each location and no fertile seeds seem to ever have been produced. These genotypes have in each location spread considerably by root suckers, - in one place over 13 hectares of land, mixing with the local vegetation. These limited natural occurrences and isolated genotypes have therefore not led to genetic adaptation of these species to the climatic conditions. They are however protected today as rare



An ancient Celtic cross carved in a cave at Seljaland. (Photo Kristján Ahronson).

Native Rosa spinosissima growing near Seljaland. (Photo Samson B. Harðarson).

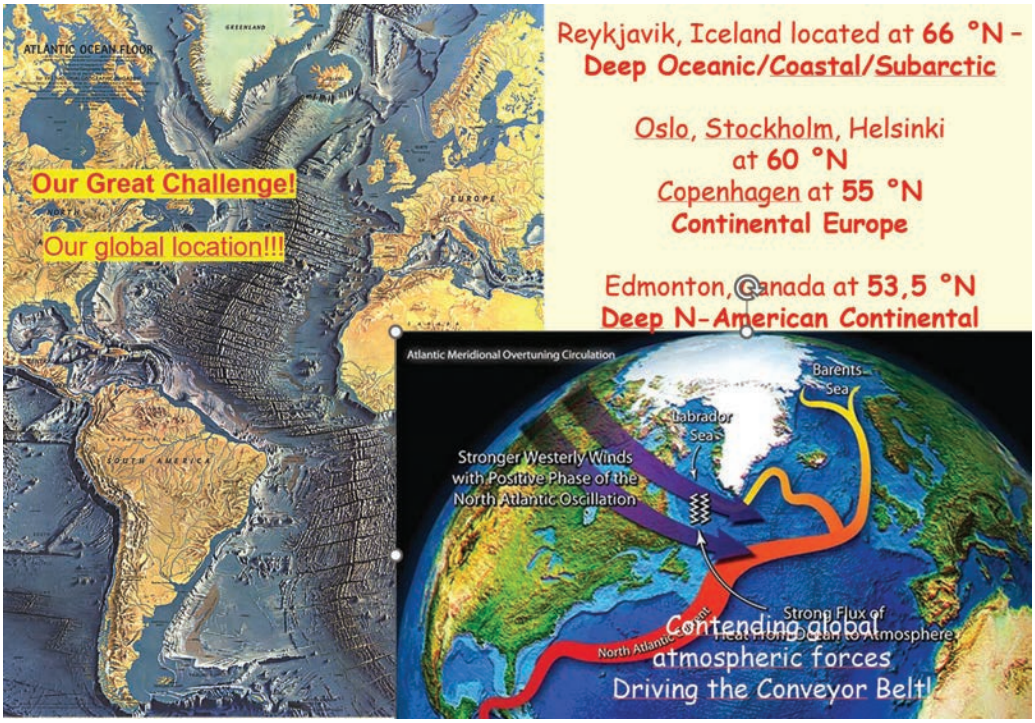


The Ikon of St Benedikt with the Thornbush

The legend of St Brendan of Clonfert sailing the Atlantic.

species under conservation laws. Their flowering is irregular and sparse. They are not fully hardy and suffer frequent diebacks after rainy and cold summers and are therefore not widely used in gardening. This in a sense underlines the basic environmental challenge of growing roses in Iceland.

Their widely distant occurrences have raised speculation about how they came to Iceland and took hold. The strangely distant locations of the Scotch rose findings has raised the possibility of links to pre-Viking-age Gaelic Monks or the later Christian Gaelic individuals, including wives and concubines of Viking chieftains as well as free farmhands who accompanied the Norse settlers, many of whom came from the Hebrides Islands and Ireland. It may be noted that genetic research reveals that 80% of the mitochondrial makeup of modern Icelanders comes from originally Gaelic origin and possibly of Christian faith. These people may have venerated the white-flowered thornbush that was associated with the legend of St. Benedict and his early Irish missionary followers. They have left the archeological marks of their presence in caves at Seljaland in Southern Iceland where the Rosa spinosissma grows

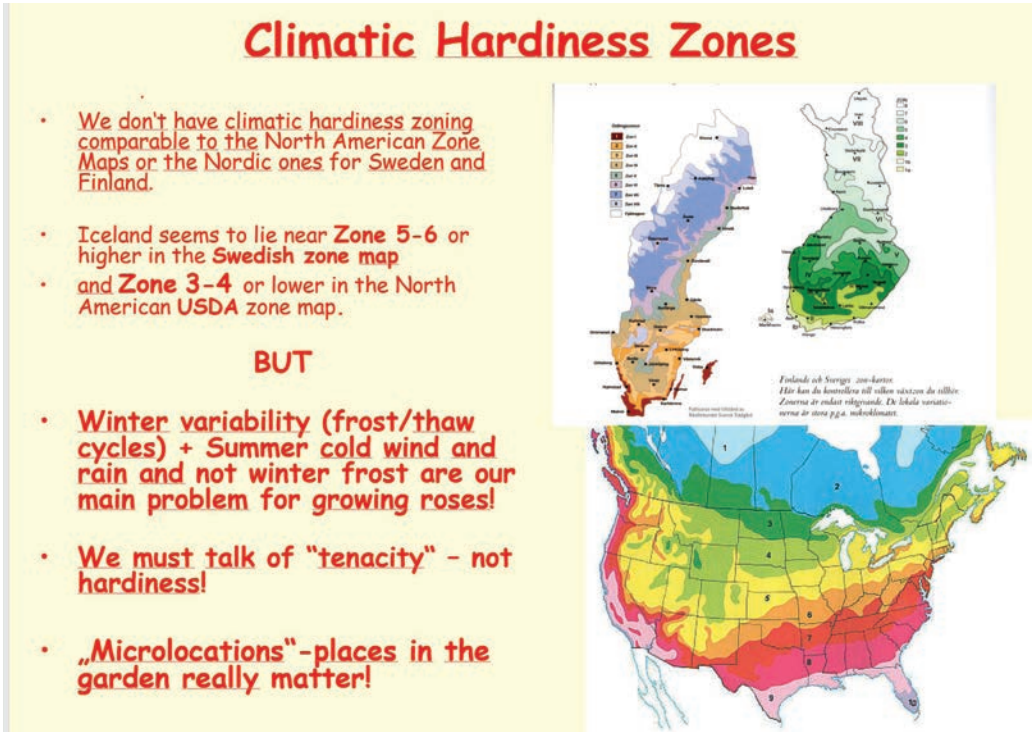


Iceland in Relation to Global Location and Environmental forces.

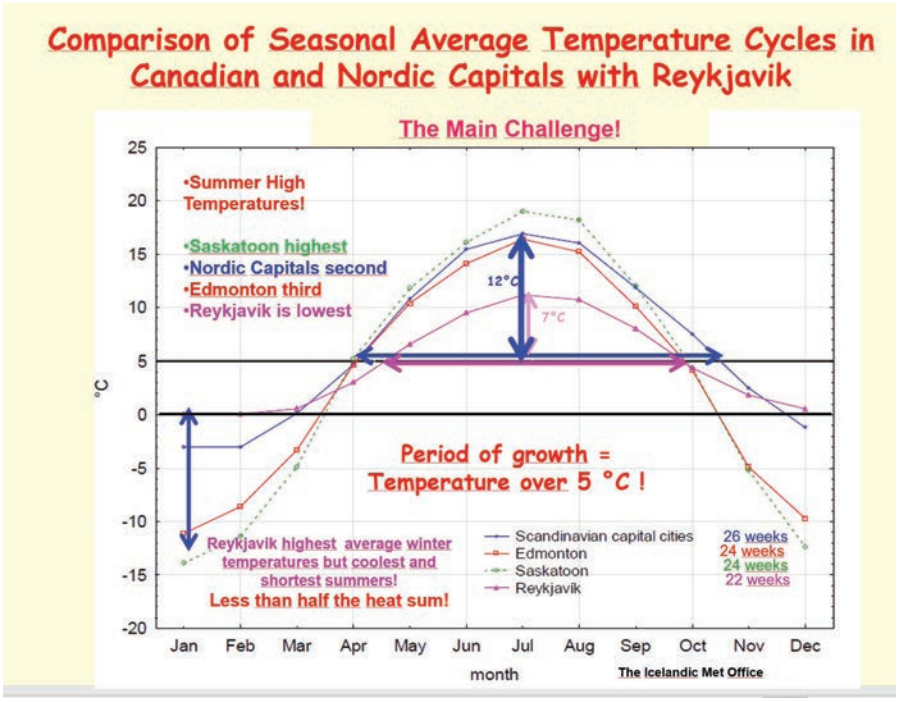
The Challenge of climate and hardiness – or "tenacity" of roses!

As explained above Icelanders are relative newcomers to growing of garden roses. While individual amateur gardeners have for decades been growing roses, mostly imported from Denmark, with varying success, it was not until the Rose Club of The Icelandic Horticultural Society was established in 2002 that organized trials were started and the dissemination of knowledge about rose gardening appropriate for our geographical situation really started. The Rose Club currently counts nearly 400 members and has now established three public rose collections or rose gardens for trials and demonstration under different growing conditions. The members also share between them experiences from their own gardens at regular meeting sessions and Facebook exchanges of comments and pictures during the winter months as they prepare for new experiences and place common orders for new roses from local and international nurseries.

According to a compilation made by Friðrik Baldursson, the Director of gardens in Kópavogur Community, from all available



Iceland in Relation to Climatic Hardiness Zones.



Comparison of Seasonal Average Temperature Cycles in Canadian and Nordic Capitals with Reykjavik.

records, public and private, on all garden trees and shrubs imported after the WW II there have been about 1400-1500 species and named varieties of roses imported and/or developed locally. Of these the Rose Club has been associated with handling of well over 600 varieties. Some information is available on the performance of most of these that allows assessment of what works and what does not.

The challenge to growing roses in Iceland lies in our global position. There are powerful and quite variable atmospheric, oceanic and geological forces at play that shape the conditions for growing this wonderful but somewhat tender genus of plants demanding sun and warmth as well as soil appropriate to its, often finicky, requirements.

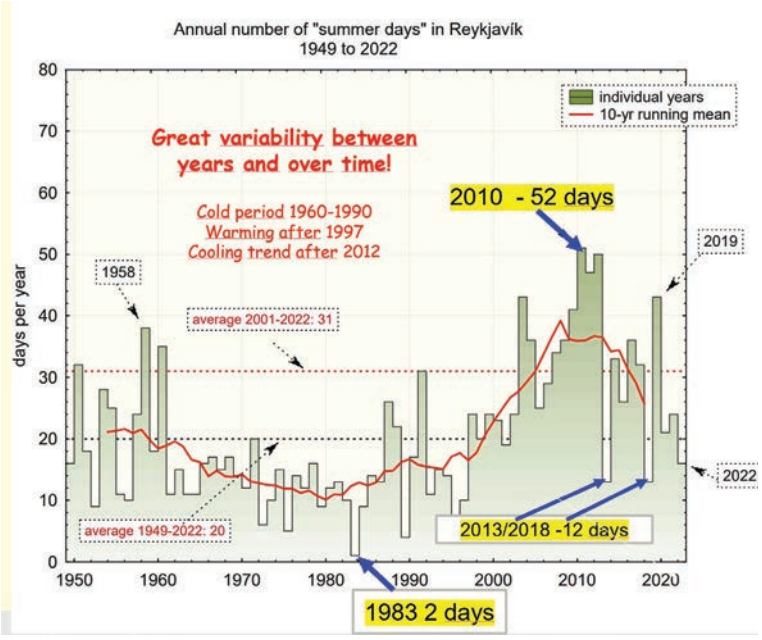
The conventional definition of hardiness is related to the lowest temperature expected in the winter and this can generally be related to geographical zones on in the regions where garden interests prevail. Iceland lies somewhat askew of the definitions used when its northern latitude is considered and compared to regions of similar latitudes on both sides of the Atlantic.

Thus, it is worth noting that *frost hardiness* is not the most important test for the performance of roses in the oceanic climate of Iceland tempered by the Gulf Stream. The accompanying figure shows the marked difference between the annual temperature cycle in Reykjavik, with that of the capital cities in other Nordic countries and some relevant Canadian Prairie capitals. It shows that Reykjavik Iceland *enjoys* the highest average winter temperatures but *suffers* the coolest and shortest summer growing season. In fact, Reykjavik receives less than half the *heat sum* (energy for growth) counting days when the temperature rises above 5 °C in the growing season as compared to other capitals. This is a very relevant measure for what can be expected to thrive in these countries and shows Iceland is clearly at a disadvantage. So, this is a real challenge!

Winter temperatures never fall very low – nowadays, rarely below minus 10-12 °C in the south and west. The average January temperature in Reykjavik has been around +1°C for decades. The cool summers and the lack of warm, sunny days during the growing season are, on the other hand, more frequently a limiting factor which affects both the flowering and the maturing of stems before winter sets in. An additional factor are the alternating periods of wet thaw and dry frost, especially during the late winter months, sometimes quite hard frost for short periods. The lack of reliable snow cover during the winter months adds to the problem. This is an excruciating test for most cultivated varieties of garden roses. Those that survive the ordeal over many years are those we can call "hardy" in our case. Perhaps we should call it *"tenacity"* or *"resilience"* rather than "*hardiness*" since hardiness is internationally defined by the lowest winter temperatures plants can survive! Thus, we have to take the North-American as well as the Nordic hardiness scales with a grain of salt. Only experience by growing on location can prove which varieties are suitable. This may in fact vary considerably by location – and there are sometimes unexpected surprizes coming from trying roses that are not considered winter hardy elsewhere.

One additional indication of our problem

can be demonstrated by counting the number of "good summer days" we get in any one season. One of the scientists at the Icelandic Meteorological Office, Trausti Jónsson, has privately analysed data from the offices data bank and counted all the days during the summer months, June, July and August, which meet the criteria for which he jokingly suggests that a grown-up Icelander would call nice enough to go out and light the grill to enjoy a nice dinner with the family. The criteria for this are as follows:



The Annual number of "summer days" in Reykjavik 1949 to 2022.

Based on 4 times daily observations by the Icelandic Met Office at 12.00, 15:00, 18:00 and 21:00 hrs. during **June, July and August**:

- No rain at 3 of these times
- Total rain from 9:00 til 18:00 less than 2 mm (i.e. small showers allowed)
- Not total cloud cover at all observation times – (no demand on sunshine)
- Average temperature at the four observation times **at least 13,1 °C**
- **Or the the temperature at 18:00 hrs over 15 °C**

He has counted all "summer days" that have met these criteria for each year in the period 1949 to 2022 and come out with the above overall picture for Reykjavik.

The picture shows great variability between years and over time periods. These variations in our summer weather correspond with the memory of those of us old enough to remember these times. The relevance of this picture is that a "good summer day" for men is most likely also "a good summer day" for roses! A variability between 2 days per summer and 52 days per summer looks like quite a challenge for both men and roses!

Problems of the soil

Mixing erosive soil, peat, manure and volcanic sand for rose beds.

As explained above winter hardiness is not the only factor that determines survival. In addition to this local soils often turn out to be a problem as they may be generated by the windborne fallout from erosion caused by historically excessive grazing by livestock and as well as volcanic activity over the last thousand years. The fallout from erosion frequently appears as fine-grained inorganic dust or silt in the soil of lowland areas which easily becomes waterlogged in the spring and slow to warm up. It also suffers from drying out during the summer months losing its air content and thus the ability to sustain the fine roots of garden roses.

Erosive soil - inorganic dust.

Methods for soil improvement have been introduced and recommended to members and the public. This involves increasing the organic content of such soils with manure or organic mulch (25-30%) to improve activity of soil organisms and blending coarse and porous volcanic sand (25-30%) to improve drainage and aeration to encourage healthy growth of roots before planting. Some areas of the country are characterised by peaty soils, that have been well drained. Then this is not a problem and preparing good beds for planting roses is relatively simple, possibly by adjusting pH to the most common 6.- 6,5 pH level suitable for roses.

The Rose Club of the Horticultural Society of Iceland

The Rose Club of the Icelandic Horticultural Society was celebrating its 20 year anniversary in 2022. The membership has grown from 250 in 2008 to 375 by early 2023.

Samson B. Harðarson lecturer in landscape architecture at the Agricultural University of Iceland was the main driving force for its founding in 2002. He was aided and encouraged by pioneering rose growers like Steinunn Ólafsdóttir and the former director of Reykjavik City Gardens, Jóhann Pálsson. Samson chaired its board for the first 10 years. The author of this account, Vilhjálmur Lúðvíksson, former President of the Icelandic Horticultural Society, took over the chairmanship of the Rose Club after Samson in 2012. He was succeeded by Eggert Adalsteinsson who assumed the chairmanship post at the annual meeting in 2021.

Pioneer Rose woman Steinunn Ólafsdóttir in her garden. (Photo: Gunnaar Ståhl).

Some founding members of the Rose Club.

Preparing an unconventional rose garden on a barren hillside.

Activities of the Rose Club

Club activity - Procurement of roses

The Rose Club has kept quite active during these 20 years. Regular lectures and exchange of experience are offered in the fall and winter months. Photo competition and the election of favourite roses is held towards the end of every summer. The Club annually offers to its members a special selection of interesting roses from international producers (Swedish, Finnish, Danish and even Canadian) to choose from for trials in members' gardens. The members place their orders in the fall, the roses procured during the winter are delivered in the spring.

Three rose gardens established

Three rose gardens have been established through the initiative of The Rose Club. The first one was most unconventional established in 2005 on a barren hillside within the forestry plantation of The Hafnarfjörður Forestry Society. Here the hardiness of rose of over 130 rose varieties has been put to a harsh test. Roses must compete with the growth of grasses and wild flowers with minimum human assistance. The results have been interesting and really put to test the viability of species roses as well as garden rose varieties for cultivation in open areas.

A second rose garden was inaugurated inside the Reykjavik City Gardens in Laugardalur on July 21st, 2011 in honour of Jóhann Pálsson, former director of Reykjavik City Gardens on his 80th birthday. Here a collection of primarily Finnish, English and Icelandic garden roses, including roses generated by Jóhann Pálsson´s own pioneering breeding work for Iceland, is demonstrated to the public. In this garden the roses that had shown promise were planted under much more gentle growing conditions and have received more regular care than in the first garden. Rather disappointingly the English (Austin) roses did not perform as well as expected. Recently a collection of roses of Polish origin, donated by the rose breeder and former chairman of the Polish Rose

Minister Guðni Ágústson inaugurating the Rose Garden in Höfði 2005.

Inauguration of Rose Garden in Reykjavik 2011 to honour Jóhann Pálsson.

The Rose Garden at Meltunga established in 2016.

Society, Lukasz Rojewsky, were added to the Laugardalur Rose Garden and will be tested.

A third rose garden was initiated in 2016 directly linked to the Arboretum of Meltunga in Kópavogur Community. It started on the basis of the Nordic Collection of Roses agreed in 2012 by the Nordic Rose Society, with 10 roses representing each of the Nordic countries. It was subsequently expanded to include a Canadian collection and includes roses from the public experimental stations operated under Agriculture Canada and also a substantial collection generated by the large number of private breeders that worked mainly on the Canadian Prairies in the 20th Century. An additional section subsequently expanded this garden to demonstrate roses irrespective of their international origin that have proven their flowering performance and survival over time. Included are some examples of old heritage rose that have proven surprisingly hardy or tenacious enough to flower and survive the variable climate. A small portion of this garden is devoted to the trial and demonstration of roses that are little known in Iceland and attention by rose lovers might be drawn to. There are about 200 roses total in the Meltunga Rose Garden.

Rose Club members in Kolding 2006.

Nordic rose cooperation

The Nordic Rose Society

The invitation from The Danish Rose Society to The Icelandic Rose Club members to participate in the Nordic Rose Weekend held in Kolding in the summer of 2006 marked a new phase for the Rose Club by active engagement in Nordic and subsequently wider international cooperation. Sixteen members took part in this event which was impressively well organized and gave the Icelandic members a totally new insight into a previously unknown and fascinating world of growing roses. Danes enjoy a long tradition in growing roses, both in private and public gardens and as producers of roses for the world by a number of internationally famous companies recognised for their excellence in the development and production of roses.

At this event a rewarding friendship was struck with Finnish, Swedish and Norwegian participants as well as the Danish ones. A warm invitation from the Finnish participants to participate in their own, planned summer excursion the following year, 2007, was accepted. There 14 members joined for the tour. This turned out to be a particularly rewarding and educational experience in

Engulfed by roses in Denmark 2006.

Rose Club members in Finland 2007.

the search for hardy roses for Iceland. It resulted in an order for several hundred small roses on their own roots from about 20 different varieties previously unknown in Iceland but interesting for trials because of their history in Finland. These roses were produced for the Club by the nursery Hongiston Taimisto OY and arrived the following summer. They were potted and grown on for another year

Negotiating the purchase of hardy Finnish roses with Timo Saarima of Hongiston Taimisto. (Photo: Gunnar Ståhl).

Some well-known NRS members visiting Jóhann Pálsson's home garden.

Visiting a private rose garden.

An open air NRS Board meeting session at Nátthagi Nursery.

The Nordic Rose Weekend 2012 participants at the ancient Althing site, Thingvellir]. (Photo Inger Kullberg).

Iceland 2012 - A Nordic Welcome! (Photo Elsebet Bille).

in the nursery ***Þöll*** of the Hafnarfjörður Forestry Association (HFA) before distribution to members.

Many of these Finnish roses proved hardy and floriferous and still decorate the first, rather unique and wild rose garden which the club had established in 2005 and guided subsequent rose imports. With this experience the Rose Club decided to apply for membership in this inspiring Nordic co-operation, The Nordic Rose Society (NRS). The application was warmly accepted at the next Rose Weekend held in Norway in 2008.

The Nordic Rose Weekend 2012 in Iceland

As the Nordic Rose Weekend is a biannual event the following one was held in 2010 in Gothenburg Sweden. There it was agreed to

Outdoor grill at the Brekkukot woodland rosegarden.

”Passing of the Baton” to The Finnish Chairman. (Photo Elsebet Bille).

ask the Icelandic Rose Club to provide the venue and to host the following Rose Weekend to be held in 2012. This challenge was accepted and implemented on the 10th anniversary year of the Club. The event was attended by 100 members from the other Nordic Countries and 40 members of the Icelandic Rose Club. The programme offered a full, three-day programme, starting with a half day lecture session on roses for harsh climates followed by visits to public and private rose gardens, the Reykjavik Botanical Garden and its nearby Laugardalur Rose Garden as well as the Clubs first rose garden in the forestry plantation of Hafnarfjörður.

A final day tour was organised to visit scenic places such as the National Park of Thingvellir and its surroundings, including the site of the ancient Althing of Iceland and as well as the geothermal power plant at Nesjavellir. On the way visits were made to the Horticultural College at Reykir in Hveragerði followed by one to the nursery Náthagi operated by a rose enthusiast, Ólafur Njálsson. The tour finished at the summer residence of the chairman of the Icelandic Rose Club where an outdoor grill party was arranged with appropriate Nordic hospitality drinks to stimulate and celebrate the festive nature of the occasion. Here the outgoing chairman of the Nordic Rose Society and active chairman of the Icelandic Rose Club (the author) presented to the NRS a locally crafted baton in the form of a capsule made of mountain ash (rowan), *Sorbus aucuparia,* which is endemic to Iceland. It is botanically of the rose family and considered a holy tree in Icelandic folklore. The capsule is decorated with a silver plate engraved with a dedication to the Nordic Rose Weekend and says in Icelandic: ***Kefli norrænu rósahelgarinnar*** - or in English translation: ***The Baton of the Nordic Rose Weekend***. This was handed over to the incoming chairman of the NRS, Lauri Korpiakko of Finland, as the Finnish Rose Society would host the following Nordic Rose Weekend in 2014. The baton is a hollowed-out capsule, crafted on a lathe in two parts that can be locked together by threads. It contains a document with information on all Rose Weekends held by the NRS from the beginning, their location and number of attendees as far as records extend. This baton, with appropriate updating of information contained in its capsule, has been passed between the outgoing and incoming chairmen of NRS hosting the event at the end of all Nordic Rose Weekends ever since.

Rose Club members attending the WRC in Copenhagen 2018.

The World Federation of Rose Societies

After joining the Nordic Rose Society, the Icelandic Rose Club also applied for membership in the World Federation of Rose Societies (WFRS), where the NRS has been active. The World Rose Convention (WRC) was held in Copenhagen in 2018 hosted by the Danish Rose Society with support by the NRS by incorporating the programme of the Nordic Rose Weekend into the programme of the WRC. There were 9 representatives of the Icelandic Rose Club who participated actively and its chairman gave a presentation on the subject *Roses for Cold, Wet and Windy Gardens* where the challenge of growing roses in Iceland was explained and some outcomes presented.

A group of Canadian Rose enthusiasts contacted the Rose Club in 2014 for cooperation. Far right is Poul G. Olsen who made the first contact. In the middle is Margit Schowalter who has played the most active follow-up role. (Photo Margit Schowalter).

Canadian connections

In the spring of 2014, the Rose Club invited a well-known Canadian expert on roses, Ms Claire LaBerge, to give a presentation on the history of rose breeding in Canada and some of the pioneering efforts to develop roses for the harsh climate of the Canadian prairies. A conference was also organized in cooperation with the Forestry Association and the Horticultural College at Reykir on the breeding of new forestry and garden varieties, lessons to be learned from the Canadian experience.

Later that same year at the end of 2014 a group of Canadian rose enthusiasts approached the Rose Club asking for help in introducing to Nordic rose lovers the rich heritage of Canadian rose breeding and the remarkable outcomes from private rose

Canadian Rosemakers Frank Leith Skinner (1882-1967), George Bugnet (1879-1981), Percy Wright (1898-1989).

breeders on the Canadian Prairies - and eventually to assist in preserving some of the roses that have emerged. Some of the members of this group had Nordic ancestors, including Paul G. Olsen who initiated the contact and Margit Schowalter who followed up on it with great enthusiasm. She later volunteered to organize a tour of the Canadian Prairies for the author in 2017. This contact has led to the transfer to the Nordic market of over 30 rare and very hardy rose varieties introduced by the pioneering private Canadian rose breeders of the 20th century as well as some of the forgotten varieties from the public research centres. The main recipient and current producer of these varieties is the nursery Rosenposten in Denmark which now makes them available to the Nordic market.

The driving force for this cooperative project with Canadian rose lovers was the privatisation of the public horticultural breeding programs of Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada at the turn of the Century. This was accompanied with the transfer of

Danish born plant collector Niels Ebbesen Hansen on a journey in Siberia.

all international breeder's rights and rights for production of the most popular vegetable and ornamental varieties, including roses from the public institutions like the Morden Research Station and the Central Experimental Farm and other Experimental Farms to a private company, Vineland Research and Innovation Centre. This new organization depends on incomes from the breeder right fees and is linked to many of the important production companies in the Canadian horticultural sector primarily interested in the larger main-stream markets. Consequently, this change left many hardy and floriferous varieties from the work of the early Canadian pioneers where breeders rights had not been established out of sight from commercial marketing interest. As a result, there was risk of these varieties being gradually lost. Due to these personal contacts between Icelandic and Canadian rose lovers some of the most important of the pioneering, hardy varieties are now available to Nordic rose enthusiasts being produced by Rosenposten and attention has been drawn to them in Nordic literature on roses.

'George Will'.

Canadian roses in Iceland

The first Canadian roses found their way to Iceland in the late sixties and some of them have proved their excellence. The roses bred by F.L. Skinner such as 'George Will', 'Wasagaming' and 'Mrs John McNab' have performed particularly well while 'Suzanne' and 'Betty Bland' are somewhat less reliable. 'Haidee' and 'Will Alderman' recently found their way to Iceland via Denmark. 'Haidee' is not

After guided tour to the George Bugnet plantation in the background]


'Prairie Peace'


'Campfire'

tolerant of wet summers while 'Will Alderman' does very well.

Some of George Bugnet´s roses are doing extremely well, in particular 'Lac Majeau', 'Marie Bugnet' and 'Louise Bugnet'. The last named was chosen rose of the year in 2011


'Prairie Dawn'


'Lac Majeau'


'Marie-Victorin'

in Iceland by members of the Rose Club and 'Lac Majeau' was elected rose of the year in 2014 because of her amazing performance through rain and storm during the miserable summer of 2013 and repeated later. Her only problem in the popularity competition is that she is not widely available in garden centres as yet! The well known 'Therese Bugnet' is on the other hand a somewhat less reliable performer in Iceland than her other Bugnet sisters. She probably needs warmer summers than Iceland can offer. She loses parts of her summer growth in the winter and produces much fewer flowers. We have recently got our hands on 'Rita Bugnet' and 'Lac La Nonne' and they seem promising sofar.

Among other roses generated by the early private breeders are 'Ruth' by Percy Wright, 'Kakwa' by John A. Wallace, 'Porters Double Altai' by Dr. Albert J. Porter and 'Unity' (Coutts # 4) by Art Coutts.


'John Davis'

'Henry Kelsay'

Many roses from the Explorer Series bred under the direction of Dr. Felicitas Svejda have done very well in Iceland. 'Jens Munk' is a particularly great performer and also competed for the "Rose of the Year" title with 'Lac Majeau' in 2014. Both of these roses produce flowers summer long until frost cuts them off. Yet they show remarkably little frost damage the following spring. 'Martin Frobisher' is another remarkable Explorer rose that easily grows to 2.5 m height and is really a candidate for a climber in Iceland. It needs help with tying because it lacks the prickles and thorns to hang on. No frost damage and summer long flowering and rain tolerance promises to give this rose a bright future in Iceland. 'Henry Hudson' does normally very well but was very slow to open his flowers in the summer of 2013. 'David Thompson' is not widely known here but produces beautiful flowers and is likely to receive more attention in the years to come. The same thing holds true for 'Charles Albanel'. On the other hand, 'Alexander Mackenzie', 'Champlain', 'J.P. Connell' and 'John Franklin' are all late bloomers in Iceland and need very sheltered warm locations close to walls to produce good flowering. 'Lambert Closse' is a relative newcomer to Iceland but shows some promise despite its somewhat tender looks.

Of other Explorer roses both 'Henry Kelsey' and 'John Cabot' are fairly well known but also need higher summer temperatures, sunny spots and shelter to flower and mature well. 'John Davis' has shown excellent performance and blooms earlier than many of the Explorer roses.

Perhaps the most surprising performance from the breeding work of Felicitas Svejda and her co-workers for the Explorer collection comes from the R. Kordesii hybrid rose 'Marie-Victorin'. It starts blooming relatively early in early July and continues on until fall and is not much affected by rain or wind. It only rarely suffers any serious dieback in the spring. It can therefore be grown as a climber. Its reputation of sensitivity to blackspot does not seem to be a problem in Iceland.

'Prairie Dawn' bred by H. F. (Bert) Harp is yet another Canadian that has proven very hardy, wind tolerant and floriferous in Iceland but needs a sunny and relatively warm location to properly show its lovely flowers. There are examples of plants growing up to 5 meters in height, flowering from June to frost.

The Parkland Roses bred by the Morden Farm Experimental station are having a harder time in Iceland than the Explorer roses. They generally seem to need warmer summer days and sunshine than we can offer. 'Morden Centennial' and 'Morden Snowbeauty' have sofar proven the hardiest and most generously flowering of the Parkland family. They may suffer some winter freeze down but new growth emerges in the early summer to produce some fine flowers in the late summer sun. The astonishingly coloured 'Campfire' bred by Larry Dyck introduced as part of the Artist Series has drawn much admiration and is generally tenacious enough to withstand the Icelandic climate.

The Roses

Experiencing the hard way

After nearly a decade of increasingly sunny and warm summers in the early years of the 21st Century Icelandic rose lovers felt they were blessed with the favourable side of global warming. The summers of 2009 to 2012 were all among the sunniest and warmest on record. We even ventured to host the Nordic Rose Weekend in July 2012. Then came the summer of 2013 and we woke up to the reality of our global position. It was one of the wettest on record in south-western Iceland.

The pattern of 2013 was, however, familiar to those of us born before the middle of the 20th century. The sun did not show for weeks on end and the monthly average temperatures for June, July and August remained more than a degree Celsius below average for the previous fifty years - reminding us of the earlier miseries of 1983, 1975, 1955 and even 1949, depending on our living memory!

This summer of 2013 put roses and flowering shrubs to a severe test and our gardening patience as well. But it was a useful test for learning how different species and varieties of roses respond to such climatic events! While the green growth was reasonably strong during this cold and rainy sum-

mer the flowering and the setting of fruit was absent for many varieties or delayed by anywhere from three weeks in some to two months in others. The upside was, however, that a few individual rose varieties did show remarkably good performance and one could also observe how different classes of roses performed under stress.

Thus, most of the alba roses never managed to open their buds, except 'Celestial' which started to flower in September. Another alba-rose, 'Blanche de Belgique', that came later has however since shown remarkable performance. Somewhat surprisingly the *R. spinosissimas* (or *R. pimpinellifolias*) seemed to tolerate rain and cold worse than we expected while most rugosa varieties and even some more complex hybrids with rugosa blood in them generally did quite well.

However, there were some unexpected spinosissma performers like the Danish born 'Aicha' from the fingers of the legendary breeder Valdemar Petersen. A few days of sunshine in late July produced a rich flush of golden flowers on 'Aicha' that kept long into the cloudy period that followed. Another remarkable exception was the Canadian 'Kakwa' bred by John Alexander Wallace which has consistently given a real show of full and fragrant white flowers during cold and rainy summers. Finally, a Finnish "found" spinosissima-rose named 'Linnanmäki' has consistently given a splendid show of large, cream-white, single flowers for an extended period and repeated the show accompanied by black hips and splendid leaf colours in the late fall.

There were notable other examples of remarkably strong response to the miser-

'Moje Hammarberg'

'Lumo'

'Itin Tiltu'

able weather in 2013 and later rainy summers we have had. Thus, the Swedish bred 'Huldra', a villosa hybrid, remained in flower unaffected by the rain from early July until end of September. But the usually very reliable 'Hurdal' (*R.villosa*/*R x alba* hybrid) which we got from Norway in the eighties was both greatly delayed and reduced in flowering. The same happened to *R. francofurtana* 'Frankfurt' (Syn. *R. gallica* 'Splendens') which normally is quite reliable. Interestingly many Canadian rose varieties with rugosa blood in them performed particularly well. Other rugosa varieties that did well that year were the Lat-

Rosa davidii 'Fenja'

'Linnanmäki'

'Hurdalsrosen'

vian beauty 'Ritausma' (also known in US and Canada as 'Polareis') and the red hot 'Hansaland' from Kordes Rosen flowered largely unaffected.

Finns have since the early eighties done a lot of work in identifying and classifying roses that have survived a harsh and variable climate which in some ways resembles that of Iceland, especially in the early spring and summer. In 2007 members of our Rose Club visited Finland and brought back information which led to the import of a number of varieties that have since proven quite successful in Iceland. Roses have been cultivated in Finland over several centuries, originally by the Swedish and later Russian upper classes under their respective periods of rule. In later years Finns themselves have

'Ilo'

'Aïcha'

'Balsgårds Irma'Balsgårds Irma'

rediscovered old and hardy varieties as well as spontaneous newcomers (found roses) that the bees and the birds have helped generate, often in most unusual locations such as parking lots and railway stations. One such rose is 'Ruskela' named after the town it was found. This spinosissima variety does normally very well in Iceland as does 'Ristinummi', another probable spinosissima x rugosa cross named after the railway station where it was found. It puts on a spectacular and extended show of flowers in most locations monitored by Club members.

Finns have also produced roses by crossing known varieties which do well in Iceland. One such is 'Sointu' ('Snow Pavement' x [Rosa x polyantha]) a very floriferous rugosa derivative released by the British born breeder Peter Joy and his co-workers, Pirkko Kahila and Matti Kangaspunta who started a rose breeding program originally under a program at the University of Helsinki. They have released another five varieties that also look promising. Among them is 'Tove Jansson' ('Red Nelly' x 'Poppius') a beautiful deep purple velvety flowered rose. Two additional and particularly tough roses among their releases are 'Ilo' (John Davis x (Rosa x malyi 'Kempelen Kaunautar') and 'Lumo' (a seedling of Griffith Buck´s 'Apple Jack') which both have demonstrated full hardiness/tenacity in Iceland growing up to 2 m and producing a generous flowering display - disdainful of rain and cold weather!

What about our own rose breeding?

The first examples of locally raised roses came in the 60´s and 70´s from rather accidental sourcing of imported rose seeds grown for botanical purposes. Thus, the hardy spinosissma variety 'Katrín Viðar'; the tough rugosa variety 'Skotta' that surpris-

'Katrín Viðar'

'Yndisrósin'

'Lovísa'

'Skotta'

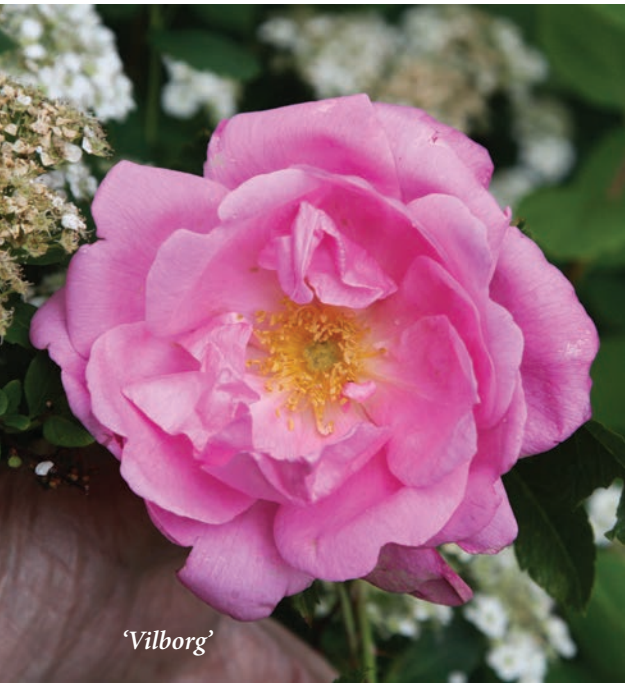
ingly emerged from a seed envelope from Wageningen marked *Rosa blanda* 'Betty Bland' - as well as the beautiful but botanically ill-defined but 'Métis'-like 'Yndisrós' (seed marked *Rosa hypoleuca*) emerged as noticeably floriferous seedlings and were selected from groups of less interesting siblings at the Reykjavik Botanical Gardens.

In the early seventies a young and emerging professional gardener, Ólafur S. Njálsson, raised from imported seed, supposedly *R. spinosissima* var. altaica, the wonderful single flowered 'Lovísa' he named it for his mother.

Jóhann Pálsson

Most importantly the former head of the Reykjavik City Gardens, Jóhann Pálsson, started rose breeding experimentation in the early 90´s by controlled cross-pollination between hardy species and varieties to attain

The late Jóhann Pálsson at his experimental plot.



'Vilborg'

'Hera Rún'

new varieties adapted to the Icelandic environment. Thus emerged i.a. 'Hadda', 'Logafold', 'Hilda', 'Guðfinna', 'Drífa' and 'Fönn' and several more named varieties that now

'Hrefna Kristín'


'Drífa'


'Guðfinna'

have become popular in Icelandic rose gardening. There are today some 19 varieties named by Jóhann Pálsson. Common to all of them is a *R. rugosa* background, some de-


'Dimma'

'Hadda'

'Dögun'

rived from Canadian varieties like 'Charles Albanel', 'Henry Hudson' and 'Prairie Dawn' mixed with hardy species like *Rosa pendulina, Rosa x kamtchatica* and *Rosa francofurtana* 'Frankfurt' (Syn. 'Splendens') or German rugosa varieties like 'Schnee-Eule' and 'Rotes Meer'. The above mentioned rose varieties from Jóhann Pálsson´s pioneering ef-

fort in Iceland have attracted some attention in the Nordic countries. All the above-mentioned Icelandic varieties are included in the Nordic Collection that have been planted in various locations in the Nordic countries. Jóhann Pálsson passed away in March 2023.

Breeding "New Icelandic" roses!

There have emerged good reasons for strengthening Icelandic-Canadian rose relations. One of course is the mounting positive experience with many Canadian roses under the difficult climatic conditions in Iceland. Another consideration may be helping to preserve Canadian Heritage Roses that no longer are available on the general market in Canada but might provide an important contribution to rose growing in Iceland.

As explained above the first steps were taken at the beginning of 2015 when a live-

Terry Roszco showing a new rose seedling 'Maybe Margit'.

Terry Roszco's new rose - 'Maybe Margit' doing well in Iceland.

ly exchange started at the initiative from Paul Olsen and Margit Schowalter. In the fall of 2017, the author visited Alberta and Saskatchewan with an Icelandic friend and plant breeding expert Thorsteinn Tomasson. Guided by Margit Schowalter we paid visits to many sites of cultural heritage in plant breeding for roses as well as other ornamental and fruit bearing trees and shrubs. The long tradition in Canada of breeding flowering garden shrubs and fruit trees for the challenging climate of the Prairie Provinces looks particularly inspiring to Icelandic garden lovers as it demonstrates the rewards of long-term thinking and perseverance under difficult environmental conditions. The fact that the efforts of amateur breeders is still continuing with notable success is particularly encouraging as the attached photo of a new rose by Terry Roszco from Edmonton Alberta shows.

On this same visit to Canada the author together with friend Thorsteinn Tomasson joined a tour organized by The Icelandic Forestry Association to places of interest in British Columbia. Here an opportunity opened to visit the Bylands Nurseries of Kelowna BC and meeting plant breeder Rick Durand who has for decades been involved in finding or developing through breeding extra winter-hardy ornamental trees and shrubs for the most demanding climatic zones of the northern prairies of North-America.

This visit led to Rick Durand´s coming to Iceland in the fall of 2018 on his return from a visit to Finland using contacts with Finnish experts arranged by the author of this article. After viewing the efforts by Icelandic forestry and gardening organisations and local nurseries Rick Durand offered to collect seeds of species and varieties, including roses that might produce varieties suitable for the environment of Iceland. He also gave a lecture on his experiences from working for Bylands Nurseries and Jeffries Nurseries of Manitoba as well as his own private company, looking for and developing hardy varieties for the northern prairies.

Based on experiences with open pollinated seeds from earlier imports that resulted in popular garden roses receiving Icelandic citizenship as explained above, his offer to collect seeds of hardy varieties was met with much interest by the Rose Club. Already in October of 2018 a large package arrived with seeds from 60 varieties of

Rick Durand at Bylands Nursery showing new rose named 'Empowerment' for evaluation from Terry Roszco.

New seedling roses from Canadian seed that might prove hardy in Iceland.

trees and shrubs, including 18 varieties of open pollinated rose varieties. The package was accompanied by information on the places the seeds were collected such as in Kelowna B.C., Edmonton and Olds College, Alberta as well as, Indian Head, Saskatchewan and Winnipeg, Manitoba. There were also much welcomed instructions for the proper way to stratify the seed and encourage early emergence of seedlings. The rose seeds were quickly distributed to interested members of the Rose Club who were given priority to order before the rest was later made available to regular members of the Icelandic Horticultural Society. Some of the seeds sent had already been exposed to the stratification process and quickly produced seedlings that started to bloom already early in the following year 2019, to the delight of some lucky Rose Club members. This initial shipment of seeds was followed by packages in the fall of 2019, 2020 and the most recent in the fall of 2022.

A recent survey of the results from members offers hope for new rose varieties emerging that can endure the Icelandic environment. These might eventually be introduced to Icelandic gardens and given Icelandic names as original garden varieties. Examples of some of the outcomes are shown herewith.

This development might signal an entirely new phase of rose breeding in Iceland based on the selected and already proven genetic base of open pollinated, existing hardy mother varieties from Canadian or other sources in the future. That would greatly simplify the breeding process for Icelandic amateur growers by overcoming the limitation of the short summers and late maturing of rose hips as well as the limited resources for testing and selection of new roses in Iceland. It also would also add a new dimension to the hobby interests of Rose Club members!




Nordic Rose Weekend – Nordisk Rosen helg

Reykjavik Island 8-10. August 2025

We, The Icelandic Rose club, have been busy preparing the Nordic Rose Weekend. Don´t miss this wonderful long weekend with rose lovers from the Nordic countries. These are 3 all-inclusive days with a conference, guided walks, bus-tours, lunch and dinner, including the rather formal celebration dinner. Come and share this lovely event with old and new friends. The all - inclusive price for the events of the Nordic Rose weekend is 75.000 Ikr. For the event planning, please register as soon as possible.

Thursday 7.
20:00
Get-together in Reykjavík City centre

Friday 8.
08:30 – 15:00
Grand Hotel Conference on Roses, Climate and society
15:30 – 22:00 Laugardalur
Botanical and city gardens Guided tour of Reykjavík Botanical garden followed by a canopé dinner at Café Flora

Saturday 9.
08:30 – 18:00
South Lowlands day-tour Visit gardens, garden centres and natural wonders
20:00 – 23:00 Grand Hotel Háteigur
Celebration dinner and change of leadership of Nordic Rose society

Sunday 10.
09:00 –18:00
Daytour to private and public gardens. A visit to private gardens and public gardens in different parts of the capital area. Ending with a BBQ.

For more information and registration https://gardurinn.is/en/roseweekend/

Post-tour:
Monday – Wednesday 11-13. August visit to West and North Iceland with gardens, parks and natural wonders. Seats still available.