April 14, 2017

Who are the rosarians? Identifying the members of the rose growing culture through early twentieth century popular writing curated in the Rosarium Project.

Julia R Tryon, Providence College

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/julia_tryon/9/
Who are the rosarians? Identifying the members of the rose growing culture through early twentieth century popular writing curated in the Rosarium Project.

What is a rosarian? According to the Merriam Webster Dictionary (Merriam Webster 2017), a rosarian is a cultivator of roses. In my mind, rosarians are also lovers of roses whether or not they grow them. But no matter which way you define the word, the fact remains that there have been rosarians amongst us for thousands of years.

How do we know that there have been rose lovers for millennia? The archeological record tells us so. Seeds of the common sweetbriar rose have been found at many Neolithic sites throughout Europe (Colledge and Conolly 2014, 201-202) including one in the Netherlands which dates from 4200 BC (Out 2012, 205-206). At this time humans were probably not cultivating roses but merely harvesting the hips from wild bushes. But they must have liked the fruit for the seeds to have shown up in so many archeological digs.

That the beauty of roses has long been appreciated is confirmed by the roses that are depicted in the “blue bird” fresco of the Minoan palace at Knossos dating from 1600 BC (Harkness 2005, 11). Roses were also lovingly rendered in the frescoes discovered in many of the houses at Pompeii including the House of the Gold Bracelet (Jashemski and Meyer 2002, 158).

Further evidence of the love and culture of roses in ancient times comes from the written record. Greek and Roman authors such as Herodotus and Pliny wrote of wild and garden roses (“Ancient rose-growers” 1895, 114-118). The passages not only describe the handful of roses known to them but also provide tips on growing them and details on how they could be used in food and in medicine.

Other Roman authors regale us with stories of Nero strewing a quarter of a million dollars’ worth of rose petals along a beach and of Emperor Heliogabulus smothering dinner guests in a snowstorm of rose petals (Harkness 2005, 15). These tales may seem highly fantastic but they do demonstrate that roses were an important ingredient in Roman festivities. In fact, roses were in such demand that Roman gardeners had to develop specialized techniques for growing roses in order to provide flowers even in the dead of winter (“Ancient rose-growers” 1895, 117).

Roses continued to be grown throughout the Medieval Period in the gardens of monasteries for their medicinal properties (Touw 1982, 74-75) and in the pleasure gardens of the upper classes. Many illuminated manuscripts depict the classic Medieval garden where ladies tended roses within a walled enclosure (Impelluso 2007, 28-29).

By the mid 1800s, the sheer number of rose varieties bought and sold attest to their continued popularity. The 1844 catalog for Prince’s Nursery of Long Island listed 1,253 varieties of roses (van Ravenswaay 1977, 42). Perhaps more staggering is that in 1849 the Thomas Rivers Nursery alone sold 8,000 bushes of one variety called ‘Géant des Batailles’ (Rivers 1877, 105). Today over 70,000 cultivars are recognized by the American Rose Society.

But just who are these rosarians? Well we know that during the first decades of the twentieth century, American rosarians came from the middle and upper classes. Both men and women were rosarians and they hailed from town and country. They were interested in science, the
arts, literature and horticulture and had time and money to spend on roses. Political ideology had no influence; Progressives, Independents and Conservatives alike were rosarians.

How do we know this? We know this because we can tease out the details of the lives of rosarians by studying the popular rose literature of the times. It is difficult to fully understand exactly who and how many were growing roses in the farthest reaches of history because so many artifacts and written records have been lost to us. Happily that is not the case with more recent history. Much of popular rose culture dating back through the Victorian era has been preserved. We have trinkets and tools. We have books, newspapers, magazines and catalogs which help us piece together the rosarian culture.

Articles from journals are particularly useful from this period because they were the first truly national means of relaying popular culture in America. The costs of printing magazines were lower than ever before due to new technologies and the availability of cheap paper. Changes in postal regulations made sending them out less costly too. This made journal subscriptions affordable and accessible all over the continent.

Editors of these magazines understood their readership and provided them with the kinds of articles that spoke to their interests and concerns. Salme Harju Steinberg (1979) explains that

the magazines were a product, their survival depended on their ability to conform to the needs of two sets of customers: readers and advertisers. Advertisers demanded large circulation figures and respectable editorial content that would provide “good company” for their advertisements. The readers, who were generally middle class, wanted to be entertained, kept abreast of contemporary issues, and given information they could put to practical use (xii).

To assuage their readers’ thirst for interesting and useful information to do with roses, editors provided a variety of articles including richly-detailed travelogues, scientific treatises, announcements of new developments, and instructions for rose-scented crafts.

The years around the turn of the twentieth century are an especially rich period of history to explore as we have available to us the popular magazines for this time and much analysis of these periodicals has already been done by scholars. So quite a bit about the history of these journals and their target audience is well established. Additionally the articles on roses from some of the most popular magazines of the period have been curated and made available online in the Rosarium Project (http://library.providence.edu:8080/rosarium/).

The Rosarium Project is currently comprised of 163 articles. These articles were discovered by searching for the subject “roses” in The Reader’s Guide to Periodical Literature, a well-respected journal index that has been published since 1901. Up through the 1920s, The Reader’s Guide indexed approximately one hundred periodicals that were widely circulated and routinely collected by U.S. libraries since American libraries were the primary subscribers to The Readers’ Guide service. Thus, one can be fairly confident that the materials indexed by The Reader’s Guide were widely consumed by the American populace during the period under investigation, and that these readers were well-representative of the American reading public.

Analysis of the initial 163 articles in the database uncovers the wide interest in rose-growing during the early twentieth century. These articles came from thirty-four different magazines.
The subject matter of these journals was quite diverse and included fashion, science, gardening, home making, travel and architectural design.

Thirty percent of the 163 articles came from just *The Garden Magazine*, which is not surprising for it had a special department just for roses. These articles routinely appeared in the spring and summer issues that came out when roses were growing and general maintenance needed to be performed on the rose beds and bushes. Just a quick glance at these fifty articles confirms that rose enthusiasts of this era were busy with the activities of rose culture the year round.

Several of the authors were experts in the field (nurserymen and members of the American Rose Society) writing from their own experience. The articles, often accompanied by detailed photographs were practical, describing best practices for successfully growing roses, and were aimed at the amateur rosarian. The level of detail suggests that the authors assumed their readers would be responsible for buying the roses for their gardens and doing the gardening work themselves.

Additionally, the readers of this magazine grew roses primarily as a hobby. Wilhelm Miller (1905), the editor, explained in its first issue that “*The Garden Magazine* is the logical working out of the growing interest in the garden not merely as a means of livelihood…but as a delight and pursuit for the busy people in the world who find a new fascination in the things of the soil.” Of course, in this era the “busy” people with time and money to spend on hobbies were from the middle and upper classes.

The next largest group of articles, comes from journals devoted to country living. “At the beginning of the new century, when prospects were fair upon the farms, when prices were high and crops large, when roads were being improved and rural free delivery inaugurated, and when President Roosevelt appointed his Country Life Commission to study means for making rural living attractive, three ambitious magazines were begun to exploit this new spirit” (Mott 1957b, 338)—*Country Life in America* being one of them.

The twenty-five articles that appeared in *Country Life in America* were written almost exclusively by men writing from personal experience. The authors included known rose fanciers such as Aaron Ward and experts in the field such as Jackson Dawson, a renown rose hybridizer. By publishing such writers, the magazine set itself up as a provider of authoritative information. These authors assumed that they were speaking primarily to a male audience as they referred to the rose gardener as a “he” and the accompanying photos showed men doing the work, never women.

Only two of the articles were written by women. One was a short travelogue of the annual rose festival held in Portland, Oregon with descriptions of the city and the roses on display.

Surprisingly the other article was on rose gardens belonging to women. The accompanying photos showed large lush garden on estates in upscale locations such as the Hamptons on Long Island. This author wrote of the female gardener/owner but much of the article merely described the gardens’ designs suggesting that the women of this class were perhaps not hands-on gardeners.

The articles in *Country Life in America* included lots of photographs and illustrations with specifics on how to do the work. The authors wrote for amateur rosarians not novice gardeners.
They routinely used technical horticultural terminology such as “bud unions” and “Bordeaux mixture.” The level of detail suggests that the authors expected the reader to do the work.

Although not expressly stated, the audience for *Country Life in America* was upper-middle-class and upper-class Americans. The photos routinely depicted large homes and large elaborate gardens. The authors described their own gardens as having rose bushes in the hundreds. The editor of the magazine obviously felt that these authors’ experiences and stories would resonate with subscribers.

The next largest group of articles are the twenty-four on home decorating and design. They appeared in *American Homes and Gardens*, *House Beautiful*, and *House & Gardens*.

*American Homes and Gardens* was interested in all aspects of the home. The editor explained in the first issue that “the Home is the watchword of *American Homes and Gardens*—the home as a place to be located and built, to be designed and constructed, to be furnished and arranged” (“Monthly Comment” 1905). Considering gender roles of the period it is obvious that the readership would include both men and women. Other comments made by the editor show that his intended audience would be living in villages and towns in the country, not in cities, and that the readership would be at least moderately well-off since the homes to be considered could cost from anywhere between $3,000 and $300,000 (“Ourselves” 1905).

Practically every year *American Homes and Gardens* published a long article on basic rose gardening that appeared in the spring at the start of the growing season. These articles assumed an amateur gardener not a novice based on the terminology used. Other articles covered a wide variety of topics including the rose industry in France, rose-friendly garden wasps, and garden design suggesting that the readers were interested in science, places outside their local sphere and innovation. There were also specialized articles on species roses and pruning aimed at the more advanced gardener.

*House Beautiful* contained as many articles on roses as did *American Homes and Gardens*. However, *House Beautiful* had a slightly different slant in that it was “leading [the] crusade for practical, sensible, simple, tasteful house and interior decoration…and was targeted at the middle class. (Endres and Lueck 1995, 159).

Unlike the articles in *American Homes and Gardens*, the articles from *House Beautiful* were primarily for a female audience. The magazine had “departments dealing with home economics, gardening, antiques, fabrics, and household appliances,” (Endres and Lueck 1995, 160) which were all within the bailiwick of the middle-class housewife.

All the articles from *House Beautiful* were very detailed which suggests the authors assumed the readers would be doing the work. The experience level assumed varied; some were for the novice and some were for experienced rosarians. Many referred to authoritative sources or suggested where readers could go for advice. Most of the articles gave lists of recommended varieties to buy suggesting the women readers had control of the purse-strings.

An editorial from the first issue of *House & Garden* demonstrates that it was more for the upper classes but could be used as a guide to good taste by the less affluent as well. It noted that “the thought of the fine garden as the natural accompaniment of the stately house has too seldom presented itself to have been realized in many instances… Just now they are more easily found
in connection to houses of great cost than about more modest homes; but the signs show that better things are at hand, even where the grounds are small and the amount to be spent very limited" (“Editorial” 1901).

*House & Garden* printed only three articles over a period of twelve months but they were all from an expert in the field, J. Horace McFarland, editor of the American Rose Society’s *Rose Annual*. His articles were aimed at an audience already successfully growing roses who would be interested in the activities of the rose society and in roses recommended by society members.

Another large group of articles came from magazines aimed at middle-class women which included *The Ladies’ Home Journal*, *Woman’s Home Companion*, and *The Delineator*. Although fewer in number than those in the gardening and design journals these articles had more of an impact because each journal reached more readers. The number of subscribers to *The Delineator* reached one million by 1912; *Woman’s Home Companion* reached that mark by 1916 and *The Ladies’ Home Journal* was way out ahead with over one million and a half subscribers in the same period. Subscriptions to these women’s magazines outstripped the subscriptions to the other journals in the Rosarium Project combined.

*The Delineator* was primarily a fashion magazine. But it “defined “fashion” in a broad sense. “Fashion,” within its framework, was not only clothing but home decorating and housekeeping, women’s issues, health and the arts as well (Endres and Lueck 1995, 59). The magazine was progressive and provided “coverage of the New Woman and broader social, political and economic questions,” though there was a “perennial focus on kitchen and garden” (Bland 2009, 175).

*The Ladies’ Home Journal* was “a conservative spokesman for the role of women in society” (Endres and Luck 1995, 172). Jennifer Scanlon (1995) explains, in her book about the magazine that “*The Ladies’ Home Journal*, both a medium of popular culture and a business enterprise, promoted for its women readers traditional “woman’s values” and full participation in the consumer society” (4).

While *Woman’s Home Companion* “offered a similar fare of editorial content” (Endres and Lueck 1995, 445), it was more progressive and printed features that resonated with the promise of the New Woman. These included “profiles of strong women who made a difference, practical advice in business or going to college, and unusual adventures or travels by women” (Endres and Lueck 1995, 446).

While the magazines were split in their outlook on women, some traditional and some progressive, and while some were fashion magazines and some were more broadly topical, all of them understood that women cared about roses. Each magazine printed multiple articles on roses illustrating the editors’ beliefs that roses were a perennial favorite. As Chesla Sherlock (1920) explains in the opening of her article “A Rose Garden of Your Own” which appeared in *The Ladies’ Home Journal*, “there is nothing so expressive of home, of permanency, as a garden of roses” (97).

The articles from these magazines show that the middle class women reading them were gardeners. Despite the fact that the articles are divided into two broad categories, gardening and housekeeping, they all assume that the reader is or will be a rose gardener. The gardening
articles either provide instructions or recommend rose varieties that will ensure success in growing roses. The housekeeping articles that outline recipes or crafts that made use of roses assume the readers have their own numerous rosebushes that can amply supply them with the raw materials of rosebuds and petals for the projects they proposed.

In addition the authors of the gardening articles assume the reader is not a novice gardener. They use specialized gardening terminology such as “trenching,” “dormant,” “slips” and “suckers.” They expect the readers to know how to “take cuttings.” It is also understood that the readers live in the suburbs or in the country and have room in their yards to have a sizable rose garden. This is evident from the authors’ assumption that the readers have access to sods from the fields and manure from the barnyard.

These articles also show that these women had money and were willing to spend it. The gardening articles recommend rose varieties which are to be bought from nurserymen and catalogs. The culinary and housekeeping articles list a wide variety of ingredients some of which are specifically stated to be gotten from a druggist.

Another commonality among the articles is that it is assumed that the reader will do the work. These articles are not just general interest articles with vague directions. The directions are clear, precise and detailed.

The other articles in the Rosarium Project come from a olio of periodicals. Scientific experiments using roses were written up in journals, such as *Science* and *Scientific American*, whose readers were “mechanics, artisans, and manufacturers” (Mott 1957a, 445). There were articles for art lovers and artisans which discussed the aesthetics of roses and their part in garden design from *The Craftsman* and *Touchstone*, two magazines that espoused the Arts and Crafts Movement. Literary reviews and eclectic periodicals including *The Independent*, *Living Age*, *Current Literature* and *Cosmopolitan* provided entertainment and information for the entire family. They featured articles on the history of roses, travelogues of trips to India and the Balkans where the best attar of roses is produced, and reprints of newspaper stories of interesting planting schemes.

As one can see, the members of the rosarian culture at the beginning of the twentieth century were women and men from the middle and upper classes, with most being middle-class women. These women and men had ample leisure time to engage in growing roses which requires effort on the part of the gardener most months of the year. They also had money enough to engage in rose gardening which requires land, gardening tools, and the acquisition of rose bushes. These rosarians were interested in other things such as science, art and the outside world and they liked to read.
Works Cited


