

THE ROSE ~ MORE THAN JUST A PRETTY FACE*Kathleen Szabo, MGV 1993*

Most would agree that roses are ornamental perennial shrubs that decorate our gardens with lovely flowers to use in bouquets. But have you ever thought of them as herbs? Since the definition of an herb is *any plant with leaves, seeds, or flowers used for flavoring, food, medicine or perfume*, roses certainly fall into that category. The petals are used to flavor rose water, distilled to produce rose oil for the perfume industry and aromatherapy, or dried to scent potpourris. Fresh or dried, they can also be used to flavor teas and even be candied to sprinkle over desserts. The hips (fruits) are a source of vitamin C and can be used in jams and jellies and even soups. Rose water is made by steeping the rose petals in water. It is used to flavor food, scent cosmetics and for religious purposes. Rose syrup is rose water with sugar added. It is used extensively in Middle Eastern cuisine, especially in sweets such as baklava, halva, and Turkish delight.

I'm going to concentrate on the rose's use in the perfume industry. My interest was piqued when I saw a biography of Christian Dior, the fashion designer, on CBS recently. It mentioned his perfumes and showed the gardens outside his chateau at Montauroux in Provence. That is not far from the town of Grasse, known as the perfume capital of the world. The special climate and soil makes it a perfect region to grow lavender, myrtle, jasmine, rose, orange blossom and wild mimosa, the components of perfumes produced here. Dior was inspired by these beautiful fields and gardens. He filled his own gardens with the native Roses de Mai which are the *Rosa x centifolia* species, also known as Provence rose or cabbage rose. It blooms only in May, hence the name. This hybrid was developed by the Dutch in the 16th century and soon made its way to Provence where fields and fields of them have been growing ever since in the Grasse region. Rose de Mai was grown for its fragrance that has been described as 'clear and sweet, with strong floral and rosy notes that transcends into a spicy, sweet, honey-dew balsamic aroma.' It is an essential ingredient in all of Dior's fragrances, as well as Chanel No. 5 and many others. Today there are still fields of the Mai rose in the Grasse region, but development has displaced many of the old growers and most perfume production has moved to Morocco.



In Grasse, the picking is still done by hand and takes place during May. It is done early in the morning, when the flowers are just opening and before the sun can destroy essential oils. The heads are carefully twisted off and placed in the picker's apron, then into burlap sacks. The sacks are taken to the processor each morning and immediately chilled. They are processed the same day. It takes 5 tons of fresh flowers to produce 6.7 lbs. of May rose oil.

Rosa x centifolia is one of two species of roses most commonly used in perfume production. The other is Rosa x damascene, the damask rose, one of the parents of Rosa x centifolia. It has very fussy growing requirements, so the only places that can grow enough for perfume production are Turkey and Bulgaria. The Bulgarian rose is the most persnickety. It is grown in The Valley of Roses, a region in the center of the country. All the work required to grow the plants and produce the perfume justifies its high cost. It is considered the finest rose oil in the world.



The Rose Festival at Kazanlak in The Valley of the Roses, Bulgaria has become an annual attraction since it began in 1903 and now attracts thousands of visitors from all over the world.

Damask roses are also picked by hand in the morning and processed the same day. They require on average 4 $\frac{3}{4}$ tons of flowers to produce 2.2 lbs. of oil.

The essential oil is extracted from the rose petals by one of two methods: for damask roses - steam distillation which produces oil called rose otto that sells for \$488 pr. oz. Bulgarian and \$279 pr. oz. Turkish. For cenifolias, solvent extraction using hexane or toluene and ethanol produces oil called rose absolute at \$291 pr. oz. This process produces much more oil than steam distillation, so the price is lowered considerably. Even with the introduction of synthetics, natural rose oils are still widely used in the perfume industry.

So, now you know why you couldn't afford that perfume you wanted to buy your sweetie for Valentine's Day.

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Harvesting in Grasse - colognoisseur.com

Bulgarian rose festival - bulgarianbuzz.com

Prices from Eden Botanicals catalog