

# DR. GRIFFITH BUCK

## A MAN AHEAD OF HIS TIME

### 1915—1991



'Folksinger'

Ashdown Roses

by Mary Bates, [mbates@charterinternet.com](mailto:mbates@charterinternet.com)

*Many thanks to Gaye Hammond for providing technical assistance with this article*

“A man ahead of his time and one of America’s best loved hybridizers,” is how Gaye Hammond of the Houston Rose Society described Dr. Griffith Buck. “Little did he realize there would develop such a demand for easy-care roses. Buck bred his roses to survive long, cold winters with temperatures as low as negative 28 degrees Fahrenheit and hot, humid summers. Buck roses are perfect for the beginning rosarian or those who wish to plant in mixed borders, as they are super hardy. With a little simple bed preparation, good drainage, at least six hours of direct sunlight and sufficient irrigation until the plants are established, Buck roses will thrive and supply the garden with an abundance of blooms and fragrance throughout the growing season,” she said.

“When considering the impact that Dr. Buck’s work has had on the roses we grow today, we must remember one thing: Dr Buck began creating 21st Century roses in 1947, when gardeners cared not one whit about disease resistance! In Dr. Buck’s day, gardeners demanded exhibition-quality blooms on long stems. Only in the last decade, long after Dr. Buck’s death, has the trend from exhibition-

quality blooms to easy-care roses rapidly gained momentum. Perhaps this is the reason why there has been a revival of interest in growing Buck roses in recent years,” Hammond continued.

“What makes them unique is that most have the modern rose form favored by so many coupled with the hardiness of antique roses and are landscape shrubs in their truest form, producing hundreds and hundreds of blooms each season,” she explained. “The Buck collection includes roses with a myriad of forms, from the many-petaled English-style roses to singles with five to 10 petals, from exhibition hybrid tea to roses with forms similar to peonies and carnations. Almost all are fragrant. Some are even chameleons — changing colors and forms as they age. No matter what you like in a rose, you will find it among the Buck roses.”

Buck believed roses should be as easy to grow as dandelions. During his years as a Professor of Horticulture at Iowa State University from 1952 to 1985, he introduced more than 90 rose cultivars, most of which were hardy and considered easy-care by today’s standards. He sought to develop hardy, disease-resistant roses that did

not need the spraying and winter protection of the roses his fellow rosarians hybridized during this time period. He started seedlings in a greenhouse and then planted them in the field after their first winter. Those that survived subsequent winters without protection in the harsh Iowa climate (with temperatures frequently dipping twenty degrees below zero) were the ones he considered for introduction. Since his research program could not afford to spray against diseases, this naturally eliminated plants with weak genetics and low tolerance for insects and disease. His experience taught that roses intolerant of insects and disease are unable to retain their foliage when disease or insect pressures are high, and this characteristic impacts the plant's hardiness.

One of Buck’s earliest roses was 'Applejack', a pink blend shrub with semi-double blooms and crimson stippling. He described this rose as having clove-scented flowers and apple-scented foliage. 'Applejack' became one of the roses that he used as a parent in his hybridizing program. 'Prairie Princess', a beautiful climber with double pink blooms, soon followed. In Southern gardens with their longer grow-



Above, 'Applejack', below, 'Frontier Twirl' Ashdown Roses



Mary Bates

ing seasons, 'Prairie Princess' blooms from early spring to early summer.

When naming his new cultivars, Buck selected names to reflect Iowa's rural pleasures and popular mid-American pastimes like music and dancing. The prairie inspired many of his rose names. For centuries, a sea of native grasses and flowers covered the mid-section of North America. These tough prairie plants evolved over centuries of frigid winters and scorching summers. Prairie plants' design allows them to store moisture and nutrients for long periods of time and makes them practically indestructible. In this environment, Buck worked to introduce his hardy roses. He wanted to develop roses that were invincible as well. Prior to Buck roses, rosarians in this area used the "Minnesota Tip" method of winterizing their roses. They tipped the roses over and then buried them in trenches, which allowed them to survive the harsh winters.

In 1973, Buck registered his first patented rose, 'Red Sparkler', with

went to 'Carefree Beauty', a beautiful, bright pink rose with five-inch double blooms that is the parent of many of today's easy-care roses. In his efforts to expand the color range of his roses, he almost discarded this pink beauty. Selected by *Reader's Digest* as one of America's 100 best discoveries (and the only rose selected), 'Carefree Beauty' is still a widely-grown rose. He described 'Carefree Beauty' as "a plant that needs no more care than a peony, and yet it blooms all summer."

In 1984, Buck filed a third rose patent for 'Blue Skies'. Although considered lavender by today's standards, this rose's color was closer to blue than any before. This cultivar's long, pointed buds open into fragrant, eye-catching blooms that deepen in color with age.

Today, researchers and growers in Iowa, Texas, Minnesota, Ohio, Florida, New York, Canada, Bermuda, New Zealand, Kansas, Nebraska, Colorado, Mississippi and Kentucky are cooperating in a united research effort to identify the most care-free

the ARS. This rose was the first plant patent granted to Iowa State University. Ironically, this rose is one of the "lost" Buck cultivars, along with seven others including 'Andante', 'Cantabile', 'Pizzicato', 'Prairie Heritage', 'Polka Time', 'Kissin' Cousin' and 'Paraglider'. Now, a search is underway to locate these cultivars in hopes of completing the Buck collection. (For more information visit [www.houstonrose.org](http://www.houstonrose.org).)

Buck's second rose patent

roses in the country. Many of Buck's roses are part of this research effort. Known as the Earth-Kind® Rose Research Program, university scientists are joining forces with rose societies and city governments to study roses in what has become the largest environmental rose research project ever undertaken in this country. Beautiful landscape specimens that can perform even under rigid and sometimes brutal research protocols receive the designation "Earth-Kind." Each cultivar must exhibit outstanding disease and insect resistance, prove heat and drought tolerant, endure harsh winter weather and provide excellent landscape performance absent spraying with pesticides/fungicides and supplemental irrigation once they are established. Earth-Kind roses must also tolerate all soil types, including highly alkaline clays with pH values of up to 8.0. Because Buck bred his roses specifically to be winter hardy, they are prime candidates for this prestigious research program. Preliminary observational candidates identified 27 of his roses as candidates for the Earth-Kind Research Program with 32 percent of the roses in the National Trial created by Buck. Buck cultivars including 'April Moon', 'Barn Dance', 'Carefree Beauty', 'Country Dancer', 'Earth Song', 'Folksinger', 'Polonaise', 'Prairie Breeze', 'Prairie Harvest', 'Quietness', 'Square Dancer', 'Summer Wind' and 'Winter Sunset' showed excellent results for Southern gardens.

Buck's work continues to touch us today. He is partially responsible for the creation of 'Knock Out'. His 'Carefree Beauty' and 'Applejack' are part of the parentage of the original cherry-red 'Knock Out'. Other hybridizers followed suit, using Buck-created roses in their breeding programs to introduce disease resistance and winter hardiness into their advanced breeding lines.

Mark Chamblee of Chamblee's Rose Nursery in Tyler, TX, is a fan of Buck's roses and has grown them for many years. The Chamblee family became rosarians in 1953 and specialize in environmentally-friendly roses. Hardiness, fragrance and unique colors are the attributes that he personally likes about the Buck roses. In a recent phone interview, he remarked, "The history

of Dr. Buck's breeding process has always interested me. In my opinion, he was far ahead of other breeders of roses during the 20th Century. My favorite Buck roses are 'Prairie Sunrise' with apricot, old-rose blooms, the soft pink 'Quietness' and 'Silver Shadows', which is pale lavender with silver overtones. All of these roses are very fragrant. Our best selling varieties include 'Carefree Beauty', 'Country Dancer', 'Frontier Twirl', 'Polonaise', 'Quietness', 'Summer Wind' and 'Winter Sunset'. We grow over 80 varieties of Buck roses and plan to introduce new varieties for the Buck family in the near future."

Pat Henry of Roses Unlimited in Laurens, SC, told an intriguing story of an unnamed seedling planted by Buck in the backyard of the family home. Growing in less-than-ideal conditions under a canopy of mature trees, the rose continues to thrive throughout the years. Mary Buck, daughter of Dr. Buck, sent clippings to Henry, who put the cuttings in mist; soon, they rooted. After potting them, she brought them home to observe their growth. She related that she grew the rose all summer but missed the blooms until the morning after the September 11, 2001 tragedy that shook our nation. The morning was quiet and still, offering time to reflect on the previous day's events. There, hanging among other foliage was a beautiful pink rose. As she knelt to look and breathe in the beautiful fragrance, she marveled at the beauty of this rose. It was "just a seed." How could she overlook this special beauty? Excitedly, she rushed to the phone to call Mary Buck. She wanted to tell her that surely 'Quietness' should be the name if she and her mother (Dr. Buck's widow) approved. She knew that Buck was a quiet man as well.

Henry introduced 'Quietness' in 2003, and many rosarians now enjoy this special rose. 'Quietness' offers the charm of an old garden rose with the reliable, repeat-flowering habit of a modern rose. These beautiful, pink-cupped blooms appear in clusters of three to nine from spring to frost with an intense, old-rose fragrance.

Paul Zimmerman, owner of Ash-down Roses Ltd. in Campobello, SC, stated, "It is only fairly recently that

Heirloom Roses



Heirloom Roses



Heirloom Roses



Heirloom Roses



Heirloom Roses



Heirloom Roses



Heirloom Roses



Heirloom Roses



Heirloom Roses



Heirloom Roses



*Clockwise from below: 'Golden Unicorn', 'Blue Skies', 'Winter Sunset', 'Prairie Princess', 'Distant Drums', 'Country Dancer', 'Carefree Beauty', 'Quietness', 'Silver Shadows', 'Prairie Harvest', 'Iowa Belle'.*



### 'Summer Wind Spray' ►

Dr. Buck's roses are being recognized for what they are — garden roses. He bred his roses with hardiness and disease resistance in mind, and during this day and age, when gardeners are looking for easy-to-grow garden roses, they will find what they are looking for in the work of Dr. Buck." According to Zimmerman, "A rose breeder is a person that breeds a great bush and then hangs a great flower on it. That, to me, says it all about Dr. Buck. He looked at the overall picture of the flower, the bush and the health."

"One of my favorite Buck roses is 'Folksinger'" said Zimmerman. "For us here in South Carolina, the color holds well all year — even during our hot August days. The bush makes a wonderful upright shrub and has excellent disease resistance. I also love roses with single petals, and 'Applejack' is one of the best. Constantly in flower and growing to a large shrub, this rose is ideal for a tall rose hedge or a focal point in the garden. For anyone looking for a terrific pink shrub with lovely blooms, look no further than 'Country Dancer'. For us, this rose starts putting out large blooms even as a young transplant and that is unusual," he concluded.

John Keith Clements of Heirloom Roses in St. Paul, OR, was a rose scholar and a fan of Buck. Surrounded by his reference books and notes, Clements passed away in August 2007. In his notes, he stated, "I have admired Dr. Buck's rose breeding for many years. I liken Dr. Buck to the artist Vincent van Gogh, whose paintings were never appreciated in his lifetime. Dr. Buck was an artist of rose breeding. His creations are now gaining the acceptance and popularity they have long deserved." Today, Louise Clements and Cheryl Malone, General Manager of Heirloom Roses, continue to offer an increasing range of Buck's creations. In a conversation with Clements, Malone stated, "Dr. Griffith Buck was John's hero, and he followed Buck's methods for growing test roses when he began his own hybridizing program, seeking to produce disease-resistant roses. I feel that he and Dr. Buck were kindred spirits and epitomized the quote from Lao-Tse 'To see things in the seed, that is genius'".



Mary Bates

Clements's favorite Buck rose is 'Iowa Belle'. She likes it for the color, the shape of the bloom, its nice, long canes that are perfect for cutting and its sweet, fruity fragrance. Clements's glowing description of 'Distant Drums' reveals his fondness for the rose by calling it "a wonderful rose with one of the most unique colorings in rosedom with large, cupped, fully-double blooms with ruffled petals. With its bronze-brown center shading to lavender toward the outer edges, 'Distant Drums' is a rare beauty with a heady, myrrh fragrance."

HeirloomRoses recommends some winter protection in Zone 4 and planting by July 1 in order to have Buck roses ready to overwinter in Zones 4 and 5.

Fragrance is an unexpected bonus in these super hardy roses, and it ranges from a moderate clove scent in 'Country Dancer' to an intense myrrh fragrance in 'Distant Drums' to the heady, old-rose fragrance in 'Quietness'. Bloom form ranges from single-petal to large, cupped double blooms with ruffled petals to old garden rose form and even includes the lovely hybrid-tea-style bloom. The color range varies with rainbow colors that hold well on the bush.

According to the 1996 *American Rose Annual*, William Radler (retired Director of the Boerner Botanical Gardens in Milwaukee and creator of the 'Knock Out' series of roses) had the opportunity to record Buck as he addressed the Green Bay, WI, Botanical Garden regarding his rose hybridizing program. In these taped remarks, Buck stated, "In reflecting back on my achievements in rose breeding, I am

quite satisfied. The only thing that would make me happier is that more people would learn how easy they are to grow."

Hammond summed it up the best. "Dr. Buck dedicated his entire life to the creation of roses that would be easy to care for with a vision toward providing the gardening public beautiful roses [with] a genetic fabric that makes them highly tolerant to fungal/pest problems. Dr. Buck was a true master hybridizer and one that history will not soon forget."

#### Where to See Buck Roses:

- American Rose Center, Shreveport, LA
- Boerner Botanical Gardens, Hales Corners, WI
- University of Minnesota Landscape Arboretum, Chaska, MN
- Reiman Gardens, Iowa State University, Ames, IA (*possibly the largest collection in a public garden*)
- Heirloom Rose Display Gardens, St. Paul, OR
- Chamblee's Rose Nursery, Tyler, TX (the largest collection in a retail nursery)
- Guisse Field Watterworth Park, Farmer's Branch, TX (the site of the National Earth-Kind Rose Research Program)

For more information on Earth-Kind Rose Research, see <http://earthkindroses.tamu.edu>

For more information on Buck Roses, including a list of fragrant Buck roses, visit [www.houstonrosesociety.com](http://www.houstonrosesociety.com).

