

EVENING MEETING REPORT - David Austin roses

Edwin Rye not only spoke to us about roses, but brought some excellent bedding plants for sale too. Profits from these and from his talks go to support a crèche for 74 children in South Africa.

David Austin, now in his 90's and still active, developed his interest from reading Gardens Illustrated magazines at school, and was given a book "Old Garden Roses" and from this he fell in love with roses. Initially he was interested in Old Roses, but noted that they lacked a wider colour range having no yellows or orange, and a short flowering season. He did not care much for Hybrid teas, but thought that he could possibly create something new - a rose with the beauty and fragrance of the Old Roses but with the colour and repeat flowering of modern roses. He started breeding in 1961, and with dedication and despite failures, his first rose "Constance Spry" was developed. On being told no-one would buy them, he sold them himself and continued the breeding programme. By 1969 he had launched his first range of repeat-flowering "English Roses" so named as he felt this best described what he wanted to grow. His first Chelsea Gold Medal came in 1984, and a further 23 have followed.

It can take 9 years to develop a rose, and each year three are taken to Chelsea. Each Autumn around 2000 roses are dug up that he thinks are strong and will breed well. Pollination is done by hand, by ladies who have smaller fingers. The roses are placed in greenhouses for a longer growing season and to produce plenty of ripe hips. The seeds are removed from the hips, and placed in cold storage as they will not grow unless they have a chill. The germination rate is only about 33% and these are pricked out and grown on. David personally inspects these daily, and likely looking plants are grafted onto root stock. 5000 bushes are needed to launch a rose at Chelsea, and it costs about £1 million per rose. Edwin recommended that in this area you should prune before Christmas, ideally taking one third off, or up to a half if you want them shorter. Preferably select bare rooted plants for planting in Autumn so they have a head start, planting 2 inches below the previous planting height, and dig a good sized hole and sprinkle Mycorrhiza on the soil. A banana skin apparently works well too. Leave a dip round the plant so that water accumulates, as roses hate being dry. Feed well at the end of May/June. Edwin mentioned his favourites: "The Pilgrim" is pale yellow, "Claire Austin" is pale pink with lovely fragrance and flowers generously all season. "Jude the Obscure" is a magnificent pale yellow with an outstanding scent, and "Wild Edric" is a lilac-pink double with strong scent, and Muntjac don't like its thorns! "Rhapsody in Blue" is a beautiful colour with sweet scent. Roses can be grown as arches but need light at the base of the arch, lots of feed and cutting back of all side shoots, and a good dose of sunshine. Roses with heavy heads should not be hard pruned, and given a high potash feed such as Tomorite. Austin now sells stunning cut flowers for bridal bouquets and special occasions, so if you forgot your anniversary all is not lost. A fascinating and well-attended talk, which we all enjoyed, and we hope that a visit to his garden can be arranged in future.