



Some of you may remember my nephew, Black thumb, who cared for our roses during the summer months over a five-year period. Our annual rose losses associated with his efforts usually represented about ten per cent of the total number of roses in a given year--maybe about three dozen roses a summer. A few of our rosarian friends believed that dire punishment for this constituted the only fair response--flogging with canes of Basye's Purple Rose was a popular suggestion in some quarters. This would have been inappropriate, unfair, and contrary to the Eighth Amendment to the Constitution regarding 'cruel and unusual' punishment. It cannot be fair to penalize someone for a missing component in his horticultural makeup. Put simply, Blackthumb lacked the rosarian's eye. He could be assaulted by a dehydrated rose rising, in righteous anger from a container to suck his vital juices dry -- and still not realize that the rose needed water. While water neglect of roses is probably a crime in some jurisdictions, an unintentional violation of such an edict would essentially be to punish someone for a disability. It would be the equivalent of punishing someone for not being able to see.

At the other end of the rosarian food chain would be the eminent rosarian from Long Beach who breezed through my garden and identified three diseases, four soil problems and five solutions in six minutes; (I exaggerate only slightly). To some extent, these disparate responses to roses are a function of interest and life patterns. Blackthumb is a young man focused on a developing career, an expanding social life, and a disinclination to stop and smell the roses, much less water them. The wizard of Long Beach is an established rosarian, with multiple honors, recognized talents, and a lifetime of association with and attention to roses. But it also represents stages in the development of the ability to 'see' roses.

We all recognize this distinction in common exchanges with rosarians when we ask them to 'take a look' at a problem rose rather than to 'think' about it. And that distinction reveals itself every day on the Internet when a novice asks a question about a rose condition or identity and tries to describe in words the rose in question. ' Uh, pink, pretty, and my grandmother grew it' is a frequent start to a bootless discussion.

If you look at the gradations of authority in the world of roses there are clear differences in the level of sophistication and subtlety we expect from different players. While there is no overt requirement that someone in the rose world possess 'the rosarian's eye,' such a qualification does exist, sub rosa, so to speak, in the various qualifications for positions within the framework of rosarian activities. Clearly no such qualifications exist at the level of placement or clerking, where the chief attributes required are agility and the ability not to get in the way.

The Consulting Rosarian requirements imagine a more developed set of faculties. The most obvious of the requirements include sitting through a seminar and taking an open book test. But if you look at the pre-conditions for being a Consulting Rosarian, the requirements envision a totally different set of skills. Some of the less obvious requirements are simply vestiges of an earlier good-old-boy network in

the form of recommendations by current Consulting Rosarians; but the experiential requirements are a tribute to other forms of learning. For one thing the candidate must have grown a variety of roses over a five year period as attested by the persons making a recommendation for the Consulting Rosarian candidate. Whether this requirement is honored in the breach and disregarded as in one district, or extended to include the enforced expectation that the person making the recommendation for a Consulting Rosarian candidate -actually--have made a visit to the rose garden of the candidate with a view to its evaluation, even the requirement as a pretext acknowledges that a Consulting Rosarian candidate should be able to grow roses in fact as well as in theory. Whether the requirement is treated as minimal or maximal, it expresses the value attached to the purely experiential learning process as well as the more obvious and common skills of test-taking and seminar-sitting. In order to retain the status of Consulting Rosarian it is necessary to attend a Consulting Rosarian seminar within a three year period, fill out various forms as to activities undertaken as a CR, and participated in the Roses in Review project. It might make more sense to have as an alternative a visit to a Consulting Rosarian's garden to see if the rosarian's eye has retained its luster. In any case, while we all know people who can take any number of tests on anything and remain functionally incompetent, it is difficult to maintain a functioning rose garden over time without developing the rudiments of a rosarian's eye toward maintenance and protection of the roses in a garden.

Now it might be legitimately argued that just because some one grows a variety of roses does not guarantee that they have acquired the rosarian's eye or that their experiential knowledge is anything more than 3 to 5 years of repeating the same mistake. On the other hand, it would seem nearly impossible for someone to acquire the rosarian's eye without growing roses.

The eligibility requirements in order to be accepted at a judging school in the Pacific Southwest District occupy a full page, with some fourteen attributes and attitudes outlined. Three of these relate to the possession of a rosarian's eye. One is the requirement that a potential candidate actually have exhibited roses with sufficient proficiency as to have garnered 2 American Rose Society certificates and 5 blue ribbons in five rose shows over a three year period. Additionally, the potential candidate must also know 'intimately the characteristics and the range of variability of at least 100 varieties,' primarily in the most popular areas of rose show entries. The potential judging school candidate must also exhibit the personal characteristic of being 'observant and careful in all details.' The importance of the experiential component to the skills of a judge is reinforced in that a significant part of the test in a judging school involves demonstrating familiarity with actual roses in a simulated rose show setting. Clearly as one moves up the ladder of responsibility and authority in the world of rosaria, the importance of the rosarian's eye becomes ever more necessary.

If it is true that the rose judge possesses through experience and time the rosarian's eye, that is the best argument for NOT maintaining minimum continuing education standards for active and proactive judges, aside from the considerations of gratitude from a grateful community over time. While I am not sure, I believe that once the rosarian's eye is attained, like any other appreciation of an ideal form, it cannot be lost except through the attrition associated with non-use.

So, how goes the personal pursuit of the rosarian's eye? My own development in this process remains hampered by the fact that I still prefer the bud stage of roses to the bloom in several instances. To me, the bud stage of 'Lady Ann Kidwell', with its long and elegant trumpet like form, is immensely preferable to the bloom stage with the quilted petals forming a facsimile of the prefabricated bows on holiday packages. Whether it be a mote or a beam in my rosarian's eye, it remains a flaw quickly apprehended by judges.



And Blackthumb? In a recent letter he notes that 'roses need a LOT of water; if you notice that they need water, it is probably too late.' This represents light years of improvement in his 'eye.' However, I am more re-assured by his comment that when he becomes a homeowner, he will most likely hire a gardener.

Author's Notes:

- 1. Blackthumb does not permit people other than his intestate uncle to use that term to his face. Otherwise, he prefers to be called Patrick. And he has approved of this essay.*
- 2. The quotes from the qualifications for judging school candidates were taken from a sheet entitled 'Qualifications and Procedures for Applying for Apprentice Rose Judge Certificate' supplied by Frank Grasso, co-chair of Judges in the Pacific Southwest District. He is not responsible for my interpretations of the qualifications.*

-- J.D.