

Then and Now: An Iron Lady Thrives

By Aenne Carver

The saying, “What’s old is new again” applies to Lady Banks rose (*Rosa banksiae*). This old-fashioned, charming, carefree rose as worthy of planting in modern waterwise gardens as it was in San Diego gardens in the early 20th century.

Like most antique roses, Lady Banks blooms once a year in a stunning show. In early spring, its cascading canes are covered with luscious, double petaled blooms. Moreover this iron Lady has valuable characteristics not often found in a rose: She is drought tolerant, pest and disease free and low maintenance.

A Romantic History

A Lady Banks is the largest rose in the world. Surprisingly, this giant is located in Tombstone, Arizona. This proves how easy this rose is to maintain, since Arizona is not known for rose friendly conditions. Planted from a cutting in 1885, this rose covers 9,000 square feet.

The rose cuttings traveled from Scotland to Arizona as a present for Mary Gee, a homesick bride. The locale lore says Mary gave a precious cutting to her friend Amelia, who then planted it behind the boarding house. There, this rose flourishes despite arid, blistering temperatures and poor soil. You can be certain this Lady was not mollycoddled with water or fertilizer, yet she is colossal with a trunk 12 feet in circumference.

Originating in China, Lady Banks has abundant clusters of small, white or yellow flowers on almost thornless stems. Lady Banks was introduced to rose lovers in 1807 when one was planted in the English Royal Botanical Gardens at Kew. It was classified by botanist and plant hunter Robert Brown who named it for the spouse of the Kew director, Sir Joseph Banks.

Grow This Tough Lady

To plant your own Lady, there is no need to wait for cuttings from afar, nor need you trek to Arizona. Bare root plants are available in winter and container grown plants are easy to find the rest of the year.

First choose between white or yellow flowers. The white variety (*Rosa banksiae* ‘Alba Plena’) is more fragrant, with a scent reminiscent of sweet violets. The yellow variety is a soft buttery shade.

Then, plant your Lady Banks in full sun to partial shade. Though not picky about soil, this Lady settles in best when organic matter (homemade compost or purchased amendment) is added to the planting hole. Keep in mind this rose can be grown horizontally as a ground cover. Lady Banks is ideal for covering



Photo: Aenne Carver

non-irrigated, steep hillsides. Like all climbing roses, the large canes train easily up walls or on any sturdy structure.

The old adage about perennials “the first year they sleep, the second year they creep and the third year they leap,” holds true for this rose. Indeed, after Lady Banks is established anticipate rapid growth. However, judicious pruning maintains a pleasing size and shape.

Unlike modern roses that need early winter pruning, Lady Banks needs to be cut back after spring bloom. To prune, follow the basic instructions for climbing roses. Lady Banks blooms on two to three year old canes, so if you trim before the flowers, you’ll risk removing the older, flowering canes. This rose only loses a few leaves during the winter. Since it is disease free, you won’t need to remove the remaining leaves to prevent rust.

Take advantage of Lady Banks’ ample spring flowers by creating large bouquets from the graceful canes. The flowers are edible (just make sure you don’t use pesticides) so sprinkle petals on ice cream, cakes and salads. Branches of blooms look lovely tied on top of a gift, festooned on the backs of chairs or fastened as a swag on your garden gate.

Find space to add this rose to your garden and put a trip to visit the Tombstone rose on your bucket list. After you plant Lady Banks, forget about her and simply delight in the abundant spring blooms.

—Aenne Carver is a writer, workshop instructor and lecturer. Visit her web site, www.thethriftygardener.com, to view her gardening and vegetarian cooking blogs.