

In My Garden, May

"May and June. Soft syllables, gentle names for the two best months in the garden year: cool, misty mornings gently burned away with a warming spring sun, followed by breezy afternoons and chilly nights. The discussion of philosophy is over; it's time for work to begin."

PETER LOEWER

The 'Duchess of Portland' is a dirty leper, so is 'Variegata di Bologna' too. These varieties of rose attract so much disease that they actively spread it about to other roses that otherwise would have been healthy. They are total martyrs to Blackspot. This disease can badly affect roses grown in climates like ours with cool damp summers.

Although really a shrub rather than a climber I grow 'Variegata di Bologna' supported on wires hoping that it benefits from the extra height and air movement. The perfect white and red striped double flowers are best savored in a vase as the plant even in full flower never makes a stunning sight, by May time black spots are appearing on the leaves. By mid-summer it quickly defoliates and if not picked up will blow around infecting everything else. It is at least vigorous and appearing among new growths in September perhaps an extra flower or two. A rose I would recommend instead is called 'Scentimental'. It has the same red and white blooms and a deliciously rich damask scent surprisingly strong for a floribunda rose.

The 'Duchess of Portland', is far more modest to drop all leaves in unhealthy nakedness. Instead it stubbornly clings on to them as they become totally black and look disgusting! Almost any rose close enough to this plagued foliage immediately becomes affected too. Probably a hybrid between an autumn damask and the red rose of Lancaster, *Rosa gallica*, it has the odd flowers later too. The blooms are cerise-pink and semi double almost identical to the *gallica*. And that is what I would grow instead, forgoing the few bonus flowers in autumn from Portland for the masses of flowers in over a six week period, a week either side of June.

Grown well before 1770 it was possibly grown since roman times. The reason I grow this awful rose is because it is historically important. Up until the end of the 18th century roses grown in Europe only really flowered at midsummer. Some did give a scat of flowers in September and *Rosa moschata* 'Autumnalis' flowered in Early August but until roses were introduced from China, that in mild climates flowered all year round, that was all we had.

I grow a number of these sickly types, but essential in the development of rose breeding, even though they require extra time and effort often yielding poor results. In the future I would like to give talks and lectures, maybe tours of my garden, demonstrating the history of roses; how roses went from wild briars to attain the standards of the florists' rose. I turned 50 last year and to be honest however much I love plants and gardening I am getting fed up working outside all winter, but this is paid work I could do for the rest of my life.

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