



Hardy Turkestan (Rugosa) Roses

by
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Visit the Herbaceous Perennial and Woody Ornamental Test Gardens any time from July through September, and before you wander very far, a wonderful aroma drifts by. Wander a bit farther, and you find the source, a large patch of Turkestan or rugosa roses. Turkestan roses, sometimes called Sitka roses, have been grown in Alaska since the early 1900s. Charles Georgeson first introduced them at the old Sitka Experiment Station (thus the name Sitka rose). They are now grown throughout the Tanana Valley and in Southcentral and Southeastern Alaska, and they are the dominant feature of any hardy Alaskan rose garden.

Turkestan roses (*Rosa rugosa*) are native to China, Japan and Korea. This plant is known as the “sea tomato” in Japan probably because it grows abundantly along sandy shorelines and the one inch (2.5 cm) diameter, reddish-orange fruit or hips. Turkestan roses were introduced to the United States around 1770 and have adapted so well to the East Coast they are sometimes mistaken for a native plant. This species is especially popular in coastal communities because it tolerates saltwater spray.



The common as well as species name, *rugosa*, refers to the attractive, dark green, wrinkled leaves. In more southern latitudes, these leaves turn a golden yellow or orange in autumn. In the Tanana Valley, the leaves often remain green through the first snowfall. The plants growing in the GBG bloom from July through September and produce very large red hips that persist throughout winter. They grow two to three feet (60-91 cm) tall and have prickly branches that spread to more than three feet (91 cm). Individual blooms can be as much as 3-1/2 inches (9 cm) in diameter.

Turkestan roses are one of the most popular garden roses and many cultivars have been released. A recent book by Suzanne Verrier (*Rosa Rugosa*, 1991, Capability Books, Deer Park, WI) lists 90 cultivars of Turkestan roses. Cultivars have double or single, and red or white flowers. Some have flowers borne in clusters, and others are thornless. We have evaluated only a few cultivars in our test gardens, but because of their popularity, look for more trials in future years. We are especially interested in evaluating cultivars that originated as a cross between *Rosa rugosa* and the native wild rose, *Rosa acicularis*. Our native species have been used frequently

in Canadian breeding programs to improve plant hardiness. Verrier lists 12 *rugosa* cultivars with our wild rose in its parentage: “George Will”, ‘Therese Bugnet’, ‘Wasagaming’, ‘Will Alderman’, ‘Betty Will’, ‘Carla’, ‘Dorothy Fowler’, ‘Lac La Nonne’, ‘Julia Bugnet’, ‘Nipsya Rose’, ‘Mrs. Macdonald’s Rose’, and ‘Mossman’.” Anyone interested in experimenting with roses might try these cultivars first.

The most common plants in the Fairbanks area are not cultivars but seedlings of *Rosa rugosa*. These plants with large, single blooms grow reliably in warm, sunny locations. Most plants produce large red blossoms, but if grown from seed, an occasional white-flowered plant will appear. In the GBG, some winterkill occurs nearly every year to the stems growing above snow, but the plant recovers nicely by producing an abundance of thick, upright shoots from the crown.

‘Hansa’ is one of the most common cultivars grown in the Fairbanks area. It originated in Holland in 1905 and produces abundant double, crimson flowers. The large vase-shaped plant is as tall as it is wide and is reliable in protected locations. It

is not as hardy as many seedling rugosas.

Another double flowered cultivar, 'Therese Bugnet', produces clusters of deep pink blooms. It originated in Canada in 1950. This cultivar has not been reliably hardy at the GBG, but some local gardeners have reported success.

The cultivars, Rose a Parfum de l'Hay and Prairie Wren, were grown in the GBG for two seasons. Both do not appear to have survived the severe test season of 1992. 'Rose a Parfum de l'Hay' produces large, semi-double red blossoms but no rose hips. It was not as robust as the seedling rugosas and only attained a height of 12 inches (30.5 cm). Similarly, 'Prairie Wren' grew only 14 inches (35.5 cm) high and did not bloom. Two other cultivars that have not proven reliable at the GBG are the yellow-flowered 'Agnes' and 'F.J. Grootendorst'. The latter cultivar has red fringed flowers and no perceptible fragrance.

Turkestan roses thrive in full sun or partial shade. They will spread by suckers, but growth is not so rampant that it cannot be controlled by pruning. They grow best on south-facing exposures on well-drained loam or sandy-loam soils. Plants benefit from rotted compost or manure as fertilizer worked into the soil at the base of the plant in spring. They need pruning each spring after leaves have emerged to remove dead canes and stimulate new growth from the crown. They are relatively pest free except for occasional vole damage at the crown. Turkestan roses are a wonderfully fragrant, long-blooming addition to any Alaska garden.

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