

Fifty Years of New Zealand Rose Society Trials

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Summary

The first Southern Hemisphere rose cultivar evaluations originated in New Zealand beginning in 1969. They have continued for

over 50 years. This paper discusses rose evaluations in New Zealand including breeding trends and future prospects.

INTRODUCTION

The New Zealand Rose Society trials in Palmerston North, New Zealand, are the oldest international rose trials in the Southern Hemisphere with the first trial roses planted in 1969. They are also not the first rose trials in New Zealand with early efforts in trialling roses made in Parnell in Auckland and Morrinsville in the Waikato. There were also rose trials conducted at Massey University near Palmerston North in

the 1940's and 50's. After these trials ceased, there were no independent trials available to test new roses under New Zealand conditions. Rather, rosarians had to rely on reports on varieties from overseas trials that had different growing conditions to those found in New Zealand.

In the late 1960's, the New Zealand Rose Society Council discussed setting up rose

trials and the Dugald Mackenzie Rose Garden in Palmerston North was chosen as the location of the trials. Palmerston North's central geographical location, good soils and moderate climate makes for an area that grows good roses.

The strong support of the Palmerston North City Council and the local Manawatu Rose Society was also a key factor in choosing Palmerston North to host the trials and this support is still strong over 50 years later.



Figure 1. The New Zealand Rose Society Council inspecting the first trial September 1969. Photo credit June Hocking/Rose Trial Archives.

The main aim of the trials is to test new roses under standard conditions for their suitability for New Zealand's growing conditions. It also allows New Zealand rose breeders to compare their roses against those from overseas breeders.

In the early days of the trials, entries came from overseas breeders via their New Zealand agents while others were solicited directly by the trial grounds committee, imported and quarantined before being planted in the trials. Some also came from New Zealand amateur breeders.



Figure 2: The quarantine area for new entries to the trials from overseas November 1970. Photo credit June Hocking/Rose Trial Archives.

Having world renowned rose breeder Sam McGredy move to New Zealand in the early 1970's was also of immense benefit to the trials as many of his new roses were entered and we were often the first ones in the world to see his latest varieties coming through.

By the 1980's direct imports had ceased but overseas bred roses were still entered via New Zealand agents and representatives. There were also more amateur bred roses from New Zealand and overseas breeders being entered with some going on to receive awards.

In the early 2000's things changed again. Firstly, the retirement of Sam McGredy meant that the great line of his creations came to an end. Fortunately, Sam had encouraged other New Zealand rose breeders and soon more of their roses were being entered in the trials. Several long-established rose nurseries also closed their doors for a variety of reasons and so there was a changing of the guard to other growers who were now entering roses. The increased cost and difficulty of importing new varieties also led to fewer overseas bred varieties being entered.

This trend has continued since then to the current day with importing new varieties getting even more difficult and it is entirely feasible that one day, the border will close to new material. On the flipside, there are some great roses being bred by New Zealand breeders like Rob Somerfield, Bob Matthews, John Ford,

Mike Athy and Doug Grant. Many of these New Zealand bred roses are now winning many of the awards and getting great publicity.

In 2020, the trials celebrated 50 years since the first awards were presented in 1970. Unfortunately, Covid 19 meant that many of the planned activities were scaled back or postponed until 2021.

OPERATION

The trials are run as a partnership between the New Zealand Rose Society and the Palmerston North City Council under a set of by-laws which set out how they will operate. The trial grounds committee, a subcommittee of the New Zealand Rose Society carries out the administration of the trials. The local and national rose societies, the rose industry and the city council are all represented on the committee. The maintenance of the trials is done by staff from the Palmerston North City Council.

Each trial is conducted over a two year period, although climbing entries are grown for an extra year prior to being judged to allow them to put on extra growth. Six plants of each type are required for trial except for climbers which require two plants. There are 40-50 varieties entered into each trial which are not available on the market in New Zealand, and many do not have names at the time of entry. It is free to enter roses apart from the cost of freighting plants to Palmerston North.



Figure 3. The New Zealand Rose Society Trials 2020.

During the trial period, the roses receive an average level of care aimed at replication of what an average gardener gives roses growing in their garden. They are pruned, fertilised and watered as required. Spraying with pesticides and fungicides has been reduced considerably over recent years.

After each trial is finished, the winners are replanted into beds in the main part of the rose garden while remaining plants are returned to the entrants or destroyed.

Each trial is judged by a panel of 20 judges which range from rose society members to gardeners with a few roses in their gardens. Entries are scored on a 1 – 10 system.

In the first year of the trial, each entry is judged four times over the growing season under the categories of Plant Quality, Freedom of Flowering and Flower Quality which contribute one third of the final score. Fragrance is also assessed separately by the judges.

The second year's judging consists of five assessments over the growing season from November to May. Categories are habit and growth, plant health, freedom of flowering, flower form and flower quality. This contributes two thirds of the final score. A separate panel of judges for novelty.

AWARDS

The winning roses from each trial are announced at a function held in Palmerston North in late November/early December each year. The Mayor of Palmerston North is often on hand to present the awards and successive Mayors have taken a keen interest in the rose trials.

An entry must reach an average of 70% across all judging categories and must be released commercially in New Zealand to receive an award.

Certificates of Merit are presented to those entries that gain 70% or more. The June Hocking Award (Fragrance) and Nola Simpson Award (Novelty) are presented to any winner that scores highly in these areas. Both these awards were renamed after two long serving members of the trial ground committee who each gave over 30 years' service.

To recognise the efforts of New Zealand amateur breeders, the Silver Star of the City of Palmerston North is awarded to the best New Zealand amateur bred rose gaining a Certificate of Merit.

In recent years, there has been a vote from those in attendance at the awards presentation to vote for the best looking rose on the day. This is presented with the World Federation of Rose Societies People's Choice Award. The trial ground's top award, the Gold Star of the South Pacific, is awarded to the highest pointed rose on trial gaining a Certificate of Merit. This is a highly sought after award, particularly by New Zealand rose breeders, and often leads to the rose becoming a top seller commercially.

A full list of award winning roses trial by trial can be found at <https://nzroses.org.nz/nzrs-trials/>

The trials are free to visit and are located within the Dugald Mackenzie Rose Garden which is part of the Victoria Esplanade Gardens. The best time to visit and see the roses at their peak is mid-November onwards although there are blooms all the way through until May.



Figure 4: The International Rose Trials are located within the Dugald Mackenzie Rose Garden.