

# New Zealand gardener

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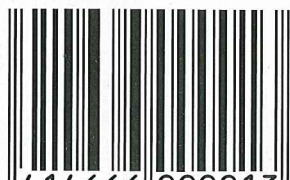
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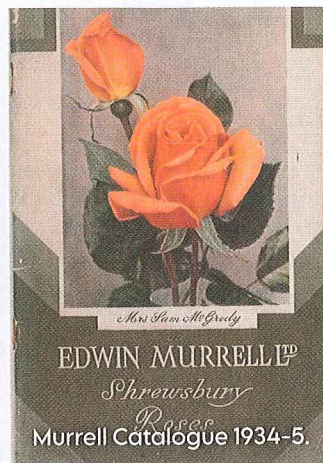




Hilda Murrell



Rob Green and the 'Hilda Murrell' rose bush.



EDWIN MURRELL & CO

Shrewsbury

Roses  
Murrell Catalogue 1934-5.

Hilda Murrell's rose field in the UK: By the 1950s the nursery was growing more than 35,000 roses.

# mystery of the Murrell rose

The curiosity of a pair of Hawkes Bay rose enthusiasts has led to the rediscovery of a 1984 David Austin rose, 'Hilda Murrell'.

**S**adly, Hilda Murrell, the 78-year-old British rose grower and anti-nuclear activist never got to see the rose named for her flower. Before its initial release, she was abducted from her Shrewsbury home and brutally murdered in mysterious circumstances.

But that rose, 'Hilda Murrell', was planted on a cold grey Christchurch afternoon recently at a ceremony in the Mona Vale Rose Garden attended by members of the city's rose society and peace organisation, and rose enthusiasts and breeders from the North Island, many of whom played vital roles in its rediscovery.

It is not known exactly when the rose became unavailable

commercially, either here or in the UK. In 2004, David Austin told Hilda's nephew, Robert Green, that his stock of the rose had not thrived and it was being discontinued. However, it was still being sold by the company in 2013.

Austin describes the rose in his 1992 book, *Old Roses and English Roses*, as "strikingly beautiful". The cross of an unnamed seedling with the dark pink climbing rose 'Parade' and Austin's light pink shrub rose 'Chaucer' is "a strong, thorny shrub of 4 or 5ft in height with large, rough-textured foliage. The flowers are large, with numerous petals... The colour is a remarkable deep glowing pink in the early stages" and with "a strong Old Rose fragrance."



**MARY LOVELL-SMITH** was the garden editor at Christchurch newspaper *The Press* for 20 years and grew cut flowers commercially for 10 years. Now she is enjoying growing flowers and fruit in her own unruly garden on the hillside above the sea in Christchurch.



## CHRISTCHURCH

Austin noted that Hilda was one of the pioneers of the reintroduction of the Old Roses after World War II, but she was much more than that.

Born in 1906, this fourth generation horticulturalist in the Shropshire town of Shrewsbury had planned an academic career. However, she was persuaded by her father, Owen, to take over the family's nursery business firm. She did so with typical flair, quickly achieving a certain fame.

Her catalogues for the nursery were eagerly awaited. With their charming covers and eloquent descriptions, they became collectors' items. She also kept copious diaries and journals on natural history, illustrating them herself. In 1987, her writings and sketches – Hilda Murrell's Nature Diaries, 1961-1983 – were published posthumously.

During the war, the nursery had been turned over almost entirely to fruit and veges, so it was a bonus for Hilda when influential author and flower arranger Constance Spry bequeathed her rose collection to her in 1946. The darling of duchesses and other notable gardeners, Hilda sold roses to the Queen Mother and the Churchills, and helped her friend Vita Sackville-West design the white garden at Sissinghurst and supplied her with roses.

Hilda wasn't a rose breeder, but she was responsible for the commercial release of *Rosa filipes* 'Kiftgate', from a sport found at Kiftgate Court. Between 1952 and 1969 (when she sold the nursery), she proved a highly successful exhibitor at the Chelsea Flower Show, amassing 14 medals for her miniature rose displays, and dozens more at the National Rose Show and local horticultural shows. By the 1950s, Hilda had achieved international fame and Murrell roses were being sent far and wide around the world. The nursery fields were sporting more than 35,000 rose plants.

In 1970, Hilda stepped up her environmental activism, born of her

love of walking and climbing the British countryside.

Her nephew Robert Green believes it was her mounting opposition to nuclear energy and armaments that led to her death. A commander in the British Royal Navy, where he served for 20 years, he expounds in his 2011 book, *A Thorn In Her Side*, written with his Kiwi wife and fellow peace activist, Dr Kate Dewes, that his aunt was murdered by British Intelligence, MI5, because she was about to present a damning report at an inquiry into the planned Sizewell B nuclear power plant in Suffolk.

It was on a speaking tour about the book in 2012 that he piqued the interest of a member of the audience, Havelock North's Margaret Manning.

Margaret related the story of Hilda and the rose to a friend and fellow member of the Heritage Rose Society, Georgina Campbell, who has a collection of more than 1000 old rose varieties and the Sam McGredy Rose Garden at her Hawkes Bay property.

Despite making inquiries around the country, Georgina could not find anyone who stocked it. However, several years later, she recounted Hilda's story to friend and fellow rose enthusiast, Bev Cain.

Bev took the bull by the horns and contacted Robert and Kate, who it transpired had been given a bush obtained from Tasman Roses in 1995, and, in the run-up to their wedding in 1997 had given away 15 plants to friends and family.

Based at Te Puna, just outside Tauranga, Bev and her partner Andrew Hand travelled to Christchurch in December 2020, took cuttings from these roses, giving some to Tauranga breeders Rob and Linda Somerfield of Glenavon Roses.

It will be probably another year or so, "not till at least winter 2024," says Georgina, that the 'Hilda Murrell' roses they have propagated will be available to the public. ■

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