

History of Roses: Portland Roses

By Jerry Haynes



Margaret Cavendish Bentinck, Duchess of Portland, 1715 –1785, was the richest woman in [Great Britain](#) of her time. She was a daughter of the [2nd Earl of Oxford and Mortimer](#), a bibliophile, collector and patron of the arts. She was also great-great-great-great grandmother of Queen Elizabeth II through her mother's side.

Lady Margaret grew up at [Wimpole Hall](#) in [Cambridgeshire](#) surrounded by books, paintings, sculpture and in the company of writers such as [Alexander Pope](#), [Jonathan Swift](#) and [Matthew Prior](#) as well as aristocrats and politicians. As a child, she collected pets and natural history objects (especially shells) and was encouraged by her father and her paternal grandfather, the [1st Earl of Oxford and Mortimer](#), to do so.

By the first November after her marriage, her collecting had really gathered pace, expanding to include the decorative and fine arts as well as natural history. (She was already heiress to the [Arundel collection](#).) Her home in Buckinghamshire, [Bulstrode Hall](#), provided space to house her collections, and her independent fortune meant that cost was no object. Bulstrode Hall was known in court circles as "The Hive" for the intense work done there on the collections by the Duchess and her crack team of botanists, entomologists and ornithologists. [Daniel Solander](#) (1736-82) specialized in shells and insects and Reverend [John Lightfoot](#) (1735-88) was her librarian and chaplain. Her collection was, unlike many similar contemporary ones, extremely well-curated.

'The Portland Museum' at Bulstrode also included a zoo, an aviary and a vast botanic garden, and was open to visitors. Many scholars, philosophers, scientists and even Royalty came to visit. The collection became a cause célèbre. Few men have rivaled Margaret Cavendish in the mania of collecting, and perhaps no woman. In an age of great collectors she rivaled the greatest.

The [Duchess of Portland](#) received from [Italy](#) in [1800](#), a rose then known as 'R. paestana' or 'Scarlet Four Seasons' Rose' (now known simply as 'The Portland Rose'). The Portland roses were long thought to be the first group of crosses between China roses and European roses. Recent DNA analysis at the University of Lyons, however, has demonstrated that the original Portland Rose has no Chinese ancestry, but rather represents an autumn damask/gallica lineage, bringing a bright red color to roses.

The whole class of Portland roses was developed from that one rose. They were the first repeat-flowering class of roses with fancy European-style blossoms. In 1848 there were eighty-four varieties growing at Kew. Today only a handful remain. 'The Portland Rose' was sent from England to France, where [André Dupont](#), gardener to the Empress Joséphine, named it 'Duchess of Portland'. It was not very long before the French had created numerous varieties. Portland Roses usually show a strong Damask influence, but they are shorter in growth. The flowers tend

to have very little stem so that the leaves are packed closely around the flowers, forming what [Graham Thomas](#) describes as a rosette or shoulder of leaves.



‘Duchess of Portland’ or **‘The Portland Rose’** – Medium red. Strong, damask fragrance. Medium to large, semi-double blooms. Spring or summer flush with scattered later bloom. Moderate, bushy growth. Parentage uncertain (about 1770).

Photo from Vintage Gardens

<http://www.vintagegardens.com/index.html>

‘Rose de Rescht’ is a wonderful Portland rose that was rediscovered in Persia in 1945 by an English gardener by the name of Nancy Lindsay, who brought it back with her and introduced it into commerce. References to this rose indicate that it existed in culture in both Persia and North America prior to Miss Lindsay's discovery of it. One account places it as having been grown on a ranch in Idaho in 1922. It was not known by any name at that time, but years later it was identified as being the same as existing plants of ‘Rose de Rescht’. Flowers are bright fuchsia-red, fading with lilac tints. It has an intense, damask fragrance.



Photo from Vintage Gardens

<http://www.vintagegardens.com/index.html>



‘Comte de Chambord’ Bred by Moreau-Robert. France, 1863. This lovely Portland Damask is the result of a cross between 'Baronne Prevost' and 'The Portland Rose'. This may be the most well known of all the Portlands, and quite reasonably so, as it has many fine qualities. It is a strong shrub, quite disease resistant, completely winter hardy, and repeat blooming with finely centered pink flowers. It has been confused in commerce with ‘Mme Boll’. There is a powerful Damask rose fragrance.

Photo from Rogue Valley Roses

http://www.roguevalleyroses.com/product_info.php?products_id=52

'Rose du Roi' was bred by [Comte Lelieur de Ville-sur-Arce](#) in France in 1812. It was introduced by [Souchet](#) about 1819. It has been called 'Lee's Crimson Perpetual'. The cultivar widely sold under this name may be misidentified. The bloom is medium red with purple highlights. It has a strong, damask fragrance. Average diameter of the bloom is 2.75". The flowers are medium, double (17-25 petals), borne mostly solitary. It blooms in flushes throughout the season. The rose is thornless (or nearly so), upright, with light green foliage. Height of 3' to 42" (90 to 105 cm). Width of 30" to 3' (75 to 90 cm).



Photo from Vintage Gardens

<http://www.vintagegardens.com/index.html>



'Blanc de Vibert' Bred by Vibert, France, 1847. 'Blanc de Vibert' is a shapely Portland shrub and has blooms that are double with delicate, white petals that have a translucent quality. Newly opened buds have a pale cream-yellow tint. It is susceptible to blackspot and does not do well in damp weather. It has strong Damask fragrance. Foliage is light green. Growth is upright.

Photo from Vintage Gardens

<http://www.vintagegardens.com/index.html>

Now for a disclaimer: There is a great deal of controversy about the Portland rose! Peter Harkness, among many others, has called their origin and parentage into question. (could be a bastard rose...) Depending on whom you believe, the Portland Rose originated either in Beaconsfield; in Dorset; or in Naples. The rose made its appearance either in the 1770s, or in the 1790s, or in 1800. The name is either 'The Portland Rose', 'Portland Crimson Monthly Rose', 'Portlandica', '*R. Portlandica*', '*R. Paestana*', 'Rosier de Portland', or 'Duchess of Portland'. It's a cross between 'Autumn Damask' and '*R. gallica officinalis*', or a cross between 'Autumn Damask' and 'Slater's Crimson China', or..... It is even possible that the rose was not named for the Duchess of Portland, but for the Duke of Portland, who was a very famous person in his own right, being Prime Minister of the UK.