

My life is a bed of roses

When DANAE BROOK started her rose farm, she had no idea if it would succeed. Now, four years later, her thriving business supplies blooms to society weddings, film sets and celebrities

Four years ago my husband, Robin, and I looked at our small paddock near our house in East Anglia and wondered what to do with it. Ponies? (Too much hard work.) Livery stables? (We ride, but don't know enough about looking after horses.) Mushrooms? (My in-laws had already done that as a business and found it was not financially viable.) Then I remembered how my late mother-in-law had grown roses to stunning effect in her small formal garden and how, when friends came to stay, they would stagger home under the fragrant weight of her offerings for their London houses.

So why not grow roses commercially in our paddock? After all, we had a perfect micro-climate for them: not too hot, not too cold, a south-facing site, good, light clay and loam soil, and nearby we had Cants of Colchester, a well-known purveyor of healthy rose bushes who could (and did) help us enormously. Even better, the land was chemical free and we could do something that might help local wildlife and encourage alternative farming.

We have come a long way since. This month, on ITV's *This Morning*, you can see a series of

films about me and roses — how I plant, prune, cut, cook with them, make pot pourri and arrange them. I have been a journalist and author most of my life, so this seems a huge departure for me. But somehow I have managed to achieve the best of both worlds, and am now working on a TV documentary and a book called *A Passion For Roses* to accompany it.

Robin and I had no idea if there would be a business in roses, but were prepared to investigate. He is an art market analyst, but trained as a financier, so we knew he could manage the accounts — and he helps with the growing and picking in our now thriving business.

As a child, my aunt had passed on to me much of what she knew about gardening, particularly roses, and I quickly picked up the rest from books and by talking endlessly to rosarians, such as Michael Marriot, the technical director at the David Austin rose company. I also learnt a lot about the practicalities from Roger Pawsey, who is joint managing director of the family business Cants, from where we buy our roses. Cants' rose fields, just outside Colchester, are only three miles from our house.

Through this painstaking process, I discovered enough for us to produce a rich and extraordinary first harvest. We only planted 500 rose bushes (we now have many thousands and employ two permanent part-time gardeners), but suddenly there was a rainbow of scent and colour at our fingertips. I had heard the best

time to pick was early morning, just as the sun comes up. So I flew down to the rose patch, gathered up armfuls of flowers, and took them in a bucket with me up to London, where I was heading to my office in Kensington. En route, I took them to the flower shop Wild at Heart, in Notting Hill. Charlotte Seddon, the head florist, took one look at them, said 'Yes, please' and bought the lot. I was so

excited I failed to realise I had accepted what would turn out to be a totally unrealistic price for them!

Wild at Heart continue to take our roses, while Paula Pryke — florist to the stars, who is also a local Suffolk girl, is a regular client. We supply a host of other florists and events, from fancy Scottish weddings (sometimes sending between

Danae's ways with roses

Planting Now is a good time to plant roses — they like plenty of sun and clay soil. Leave at least 2ft between your bushes, because they need good air circulation. Also, provide wind protection in the form of walls, hedges or specialist netting.

Arranging I love the deep pink Bourbon rose Madame Isaac Pereire. For scent and colour it is unbeatable, but the stems are often short, so I float them in bowls. For taller versions of the same vivid colour range, I use Princess Alexandra, which lasts well; also Constance Spry, Mary Rose and Louise Odier. Susan is one of the prettiest whites and, mixed with English Miss, which

comes in tiny sprays edged with pinks, it is perfect for bridesmaids' bouquets or wildflower mixtures, and I love the slightly less robust lilac colours of Shocking Blue or Purple Tiger, which mix brilliantly with pink.

Pot pourri We use an old-fashioned method that utilises orris (iris) root to preserve the petals, which takes several weeks of treatment. You can make a simple pot pourri by just spreading fresh picked petals out on a newspaper or cotton cloth to leave in a darkened airing cupboard for about three weeks. The petals need to be dry and crisp like cornflakes. You then put them into a ceramic jar with an airtight

lid, perhaps with a sprinkle of rose oil, and shake them out when you want them. Choose the darkest reds and pinks, such as Prince William, L.D. Braithwaite, Valiant Prince, Deep Secret and Charles de Mills, as they last longest once dried.

Edible flowers Many cuisines, from Turkish to Lebanese, Moroccan to French, use rose petals or rose water in their recipes. I like to use red and pink petals for freezing in ice cubes. They look very pretty in a glass of Pimm's, white wine or lemonade.

We also make a 'Rose-ade' with dark rose petals thrown into a litre of mineral water and brought to the boil for one minute. Pour into a glass jug, add a spoonful of honey and a squeeze of lemon and leave overnight.

Perfume When it comes to fragrance, I love Evelyn, a David Austin rose developed for Crabtree & Evelyn, which is used in its scent. Evelyn. Other fragrant favourites include Abraham Darby, a many-petaled creamy apricot pink rose; Pure Bliss; and the famous, huge, yellow Peace Rose, which was created in France in the early 1940s, and came to symbolise the end of World War II.



Sweet smell of success: Danae's rose business started in a converted paddock. Below left: Danae in her garden



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2,000 to 3,000 roses) to small country ceremonies. It is fun to let people come to the rose fields and see exactly what they want and choose their own colours; sometimes I help put together a bride's bouquet, or garlands for the bridesmaids. Being able to add a huge box or basketful of rose-petal confetti to the order is another delight. It is so much more beautiful and ecological than anything else (vicars love petals as they are biodegradable and don't mess up their churchyards), and petals scattered on white linen tablecloths just add to the sumptuous look and smell

of the day. We've also provided roses for film sets, such as the BBC's new costume drama, *He Knew He Was Right*, an Anthony Trollope adaptation by Andrew Davies and starring Bill Nighy, starting later this month, and *Neverland*, with Johnny Depp.

They have been used abundantly at smart London summer parties and once we were asked, at the last moment, for a huge bouquet for the shoe shop Gina, because Victoria Beckham was coming to buy shoes and she adores roses. We were also asked to send a huge box of mixed Indian colours — bright magenta, citrus yellow and orange confetti petals and roses — to a secret location, as a sensual anniversary gesture from one very famous woman to her pop star husband.

Georgie Bailey, who does the flowers for London clubs such as Annabel's, particularly likes one of my favourites: Gertrude Jekyll, a deep fragrant, pink, old-fashioned rose, which mixes stunningly with the reds of Isabella or L.D. Braithwaite. Naturally, you have to choose the right flower for the situation. In a dark and airless room, the more delicate blooms, like Heritage, do not last. You need something tougher, such as the modern roses that look old-fashioned — Big Purple, a sumptuous, rich long-stemmed rose, which lasts well, or Just Joey, a velvety deep apricot, or Princess Alexandra, which combines the best features of old and new, or Penny Lane, one of the prettiest creamy sprays.

Sometimes, of course, there are disasters. The first time we sent old-fashioned roses to a film set, no one had taken into account the heat from the lights so, inevitably, the first bowls, sitting so elegantly on their Victorian table tops, wilted. Second time round, they were delivered at the last moment, put into iced water, and kept in a refrigerated room overnight, and that worked perfectly.

The crucial thing is to make sure that when the blooms arrive, they have a long, cold drink of water, maybe eight to 12 hours before an event — then you can add either a little sugar or a pinch of bicarbonate of soda into the water to help perk them up. You'll find this treatment will revive the most jaded plants.

Roses have been prized for thousands of years for their healing, soothing properties. We know that Cleopatra bathed with rose petals strewn in her bath, and slept on rose-petal pillows; in the dry, dusty desert conditions, they were used to calm the eyes and skin. You can easily make rose water for yourself, as I do at home. Just take two handfuls of petals (make sure they have not been chemically treated), add them to a litre of mineral water and bring to the boil for a moment. You can keep it in the fridge for up to three days and use it for culinary purposes (see left) or as a mildly astringent toner to soothe your complexion.

Danae's rose farm will feature on ITV's *This Morning* on Wednesdays, after the 11am news, until the end of March. For details, visit www.countryroses.co.uk or tel: 01206 273565.