

Blooming marvellous: How one farmer is leading a revival of the true English rose

By Sophie Morris

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The phrase "English rose" is often used to describe a girl with a pale complexion and a bloom to the cheeks. When it comes to flowers, though, so many foreign species are flown in from hotter climes that even many florists don't know what a true English rose looks like. Nor can they recognise their scent, unique to each species, a luxury that is often bred out of other roses.

Danaë Brook discovered this lack of expertise when she decided to start growing and selling her own English roses from the garden of her French-style stone house in the village of Little Horkesley in Essex, which stands in 40 acres of land. "I'm still amazed by how many florists are not used to working with English roses," she says.

Now in its seventh year, her company Country Roses provides the flowers for private royal events and society weddings. Celebrities including Victoria Beckham shop for her roses at top London florists such as Paula Pryke and Pulbrook & Gould; they are used on Hollywood film sets; and even in works of art: last year, Savile Row was cordoned off so that Brook and her team could deliver 10,000 red roses to a gallery for an installation by the Turner Prize-nominated artist Anya Gallacio.

Brook, a journalist and author, set up the business with her husband, Robin Duthy, in 2001, a year after they married. The couple were inspired by a mutual desire to make use of their land and feel part of the local community and economy. Brook grew up in Kent and her love for the flower blossomed in an aunt's rose gardens.

Duthy's mother, in whose house they now live, also grew beautiful roses. Their stretch of Essex has an ideal microclimate for growing roses, with its high sun-to-rain ratio and light clay soil.

Their first batch of 500 rose bushes, sourced from a local grower, produced such lovely blooms that Brook took them along to the upmarket Notting Hill florist Wild at Heart for an expert opinion. They loved them and wanted more. "The florist was a bit fed up with these long stems from Africa," explains Duthy. "All of them are exactly the same: they may or may not open, none of them have a scent."

The wonderful and distinct scents of the 60 species of rose they now grow are part of the allure of English roses. "If you walk into a marquee or church full of English roses, the scent and colours are overwhelming, and that's what captures people," says Brook, who is currently planning a riot of voluptuous jewel-coloured blooms to decorate the hospitality area at the smoothie-maker Innocent's Village Fete in Regent's Park next month.



DAVID SANDISON

Danaë Brook surrounded by some of the 60 different species of English rose that she grows in Essex

She likens the flowers to those in still-life paintings by the old masters, where a few petals have often dropped. "They're a slice of nature in the hand, thus unpredictable. People fall in love with them or they go crazy because they don't understand that the petals drop." An English rose will last between five and 10 days, while a stem from the Netherlands may last up to three weeks. "But they're not like roses at all," says Brook. "They don't look like roses, they don't smell like roses. They should be had by the Trade Descriptions Act!"

Not only are Brook's blowsy blooms an immersive sensory experience, they have solid ecological credentials. While not quite organic (they do spray the aphids), most of the roses are grown in the open air, apart from a few new species in a solar-heated greenhouse. No industrial flower-growing methods are used. This means the roses are only available in season, from May to November, though the greenhouse means some species can now be supplied from April.

By her second year in the business, Brook was supplying four top London florists, so she planted 2,000 new bushes to ensure that she wouldn't let anyone down on an order. The following year, after an "agonising" few months weighing up the risks and potential rewards, she decided to plant another 10,000 bushes. Rain is the biggest challenge in rose cultivation, and last year's heavy downpours presented a potential disaster. "A lot of the rose bushes were damaged, but we managed to surf it," Brook recalls.

As all the flowers are grown and sold in the UK and Ireland, their carbon footprint is kept to a minimum. Consumers are becoming more aware of "flower miles", and how much CO2 is emitted on the journey from bush to bouquet; they are also keen to support British growers. Last year, the Gardeners' World presenter Sarah Raven launched a "buy British" campaign, with which Brook was heavily involved. The publicity flushed out even more florists who were keen to sell English roses but unsure where to source them.

"It's like couture floristry," Brook muses. "It all has to be done by hand and with great love and care." She confesses to being a rose nut, and only using rose-scented cosmetics. She also drops a few petals in a hot bath and freezes some in ice cubes for Pimm's. She is currently writing a book about the rose, and has investigated its medicinal qualities.

Another British company that grows English roses is the Real Flower Company, which opened in Selfridges last week and makes central-London deliveries on a trike to cut back on emissions. Like Country Roses, it was started by a few rose enthusiasts who wanted to reintroduce real, scented English roses to British buyers. They grow on two farms, one in Hampshire and one in Kenya, and say that, because all the blooms are flown to the UK on passenger airlines, their carbon footprint is minimal. A study commissioned by the UK importers World Flowers and Sainsbury's last year found that Kenyan-grown flowers air-freighted to the UK emit less carbon than Dutch roses grown using industrial techniques.

Country Roses sells stems via its website for £1.95 each, and a bouquet from the Real Flower Company with 12 roses will set you back £35, though this is the same price charged by Marks & Spencer for a dozen premier Dutch or Colombian roses. A 12-stem bouquet from Interflora is £34.99. Waitrose actually sells English roses at some of its main stores, supplied by the Real Flower Company, and offers 10 Ecuadorian roses for £22. However, if you buy English roses from florists such as Wild at Heart, you will probably pay £5 per stem.

Brook believes that, since we are willing to pay more for organic food, flowers shouldn't be any different. But these prices suggest that English roses are not necessarily much more expensive than foreign-grown flowers, simply more difficult to come by.

The Waitrose roses are Fairtrade, but that is not the case with all flowers flown in from Africa and Latin America. In fact, most workers in Kenya, Colombia and Ecuador are poorly paid casual staff and receive no benefits.

Most people lucky enough to receive a bouquet of English roses adore them, but they even got a professional seal of approval from a hard-nosed cockney trader at Covent Garden market earlier this year. "You don't usually get many compliments there, but he said they were exquisite," says Duthy. "He was really excited about stocking them."

www.countryroses.co.uk; www.realflowers.co.uk

Native English flowers to pick yourself

Common Bluebell (*Hyacinthoides non-scripta*)

Bluebells carpet English forests, hedgerows and clifftops between April and June. They are under threat from the Spanish bluebell, a cultivated garden plant, and are a protected species, so it is a criminal offence to remove bulbs from the wild. However, seeds can be bought for around £1.25 for 100.

Red Valerian (*Centranthus ruber*)

Also known as Jupiter's beard and Pretty Betsy, this ornamental native of the Mediterranean has become a naturalised part of the English countryside. The flowers are normally purplish-red, but can be found in lavender or white. Grows particularly well in coastal areas, but can also be found flourishing on the roadside.

English daisy (*Bellis perennis*)

Although, strictly speaking, a weed, *Bellis perennis* is considered the archetypal daisy, pretty to look at and tasty to eat (try adding buds and petals to your salad). Slightly less plausible are its supposed magical powers for encouraging love and lust. They can be found in abundance in meadows, on grassland, and in most back gardens between February and October.

Toadflax (*Linaria vulgaris*)

The gorgeous yellow and orange of this snapdragon-like flower has earned it the nickname Butter and Eggs. It's very graceful and can be found in hedgerows and meadows between July and October. It lasts long after cutting so is perfect for popping in a vase.

Tufted vetch (*Vicia cracca*)

This fast-growing, somewhat showy plant is used as forage for cattle and enriches the soil around it. Its purple flowers make it a bit of a looker, too. Find between June and August in hedgerows and meadows.

Seeds for all of these flowers can be found at www.nickys-nursery.co.uk

James Cooper

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