

The legendary Rose of Iran¹

The original 'true' Rose looks quite different from the multi-layered Rose we are used to admiring. The bulky ovary, the "rose hip" has on its rim five sepals, which alternate with five petals. This arrangement is common to all roses. In many 'cultivated' types the stamens in the middle of the flower have become petal-like, too, creating multiple layers. In its early young stage the single layer of delicate petals are well laid out in a circular row but in a fully mature Rose the Petals become thick and broadened, thus overlapping each other (as in the photo).

For over 5,000 years **China** and **Persia** had remained the documented habitat of the *naturally fragrant varieties freely recurrent in bloom and the only ones that bore yellow flowers*. The elegant single layered Iranian Rose growing in the Rose fields of Qasmar, near Kashan, possesses such an exquisite and heavenly perfume it is nurtured and grown entirely for its nectar. **Such was the legendary resplendence of the fragrance of the Rose water - Gool Ab that the nectar itself, by its very name, became the Rose.** Indeed, the time-honoured extraction from the blossoms in these Rose fields in mid-Spring is witnessed by thousands of tourists. Even the harvesting of the flowers is a delicate process done before sunrise to obtain the most exquisite aroma in the maximum quantity. The photo shows all three colours in the same rose - deep red, bright pink and pure white, although commonly found in the fields are also Roses exclusively red (gool-e-sorkh), pink (gool-e-surati) or white (gool-e-sefid).

The velvety texture of the undulating petals in these shades of white to pink to red is likened to a rosy cheeked blushing complexion of a beautiful Iranian lady. Many a bard has likened the blooms to signify deep admiration, amorous joy, bashfulness, embarrassment... , indeed, the very symbol of life.

Its allure represents the passion of living and the thorns, the difficulties one has to endure to reach that state. Such aesthetic tastes glorified in poetic couplets were posted on the palace gates of the Sassanian Emperor, Khusru the Great (531-579 BCE) at a time when Europe was still subservient to the Roman occupation. English history as taught in Schools and universities had not yet 'begun' and the Renaissance in Europe was still to occur 1,000 years later.

A Sassanian portrait would be deemed inadequate without a rose held delicately between index finger and thumb. Of significance, too, is a lone single layered rosette carved in the gable end of the entrance, the only decoration on the tomb of Cyrus the Great (599-529 BCE) shown in a sketch executed by the visiting envoys of Queen Christina of Sweden in 1638. Now, only the lower end of the rosette remains as the trace. The Iranian tradition of Rose water mixed with saffron as ink is still commonly used for writing charms and romantic verse.

¹ This article was posted on vohuman.org on July 12, 2005.

*“...the twist, the turn of thy hair
- tell me, what be the reason?”*

*Thy inebriated eyes' distant stare
- tell me, what be the reason?”*

*...though rose petals have not been
scattered ... thy rose scented aura
...tell me, what be the reason.*

- Jalal ud din Rumi



Courtesy - 'Gardens of Persia' by Penelope Hobhouse;
Photo by Jerry Harpur, San Diego, 2003

It is of great importance to realise that the elegant Iranian Rose had been nominated National Treasure of Persia long before any nation deemed any other variety to be the official National Flower Emblem.

The legendary Rose of Iran and its exquisite fragrance have been admired for millennia. The Rose had been nominated as 'The National Treasure of Persia' long before any other nation deemed a rose a National Flower Emblem. The Persian rose and its extract Gool Ab (literal meaning 'rose water'. It also means the rose itself) have remained an integral part of Zoroastrian traditions and rituals. The Rose has continued to capture the imagination of poets and intellectuals as described in this article.

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