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Cultivating an Obsession

By Valerie Sudol
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

Gertrude Stein claimed "...a rose is a rose is a rose," as if one were very like another. Don't try to convince rose fanciers that there's no distinction to be made — the enormous variety of color, form and habit in this elegant genus is exactly what has them enthralled.

Floribundas, grandifloras, hybrid teas, miniatures and climbers, antique and brand-new, roses come in a dazzling array of individually endearing styles. If you admire roses, you're in good company; this flower is one of the oldest in cultivation and among the best-loved throughout history.

You'll find the serious addicts banded together in local and national rose societies where deep preoccupation with the subtle qualities of a single flower is unremarkable; it's the norm among rosarians who are far gone in their single-minded pursuit of the perfect rose.

And what exactly is a rosarian — a rose fancier, a rose grower or a rose expert?

"All of the above," says William Sehl, president of the Jersey Shore Rose Society, the second largest of New Jersey's five local associations. "Rosarian is also spelled r-o-s-e n-u-t."

He's one of them — he freely admits it — and drives around his territory in a rose-red car with a bumper sticker warning "Rose nut aboard." They're a gregarious bunch, these rose folks, happiest when they're poking their noses into other people's gardens or sagely discussing the exhibition potential of some promising new introduction.

"We're a bunch of crazies from all walks of life — engineers, physicians, school teachers, pharmacists...", says Sehl. "The one common thread is that we can sit and talk, argue and raise all kinds of hell about roses."

He is a medical technician, now retired from his position as lab manager at Monmouth Medical Center in Long Branch. You don't have to be retired to become seriously involved in rose-growing, but it helps to be without the pesky distractions of a job — you have more time to fully devote yourself to this delightful and all-consuming hobby.

At Sehl's home in Neptune, a 'Jeanne La Joie' climber cascades from the eaves of his front porch in a glorious spill of pale pink flowers, 'Gertrude Jekyll' scales the back fence in a profusion of fragrant blossoms and newly hybridized "minis," yet unnamed, cluster 'round his favorite bench.

"I only have a 100 or so — that's nothing," he says, referring to his collection of shrubs. "Let's go see some real masochists."

Betty Jolly lives across town in Shark River Hills, where her corner plot is crammed with about 700 roses. To be fair, a copious number of them are miniatures — rosarians love them because their small proportions mean you can grow more varieties in a given space.