





# The Columbus *Park of Roses*

HOME OF THE AMERICAN ROSE SOCIETY 1954-1974

By Dr. Jim Hering

IN THE MID 1940S, as our country was recovering from World War II, the Columbus Rose Club entertained the establishment of a municipal rose garden in Columbus, Ohio, at City Hall since there was no public rose garden in the city at that time. Unfortunately, neither the Mayor nor City Council showed any interest in the project, and the plans were abandoned. The idea persisted in the minds of the members, however, and when, several years later, a new organization, the Central Ohio Rose Society, proposed that the project be revived, a joint committee was formed to pursue it.

The committee met with Mayor James A. Rhodes and explained how Columbus would benefit from and how it

could afford a municipal rose garden:

1. A rose garden would provide aesthetics for the citizens of the city;
2. The city had a number of undeveloped sites available;
3. Since Columbus wished to attract conventions, additional points of interest were needed; and
4. Gardens draw thousands of visitors yearly, and the resultant tourist revenue would be very desirable for merchants.

The Mayor proceeded to sell City Council on the idea of a major garden which in time would take its place among the finest rose gardens in the world. To establish a "Park of Roses" with an administration building, Council appropriated \$205,000.

Whetstone Park was selected as the site for the new municipal rose garden. The park is located in north Columbus, in an area known as Clintonville, and fronts on the east bank of the Olentangy River. The original owner of the 149 acres, John Rathbone, obtained the land under the United States Military Land Grants following the American Revolution. Once part of a horse farm, the land was used by area residents for



OPPOSITE PAGE: Observation tower and 'Purple Rain', photo Stephanie Williams; THIS PAGE: Park of Roses, photo Jim Hering.







victory gardens during WWII. In 1944 the site was purchased by the city of Columbus for a city park, and it was named Whetstone Park for the whet stones which are found along the bank of the river in that area and were used by early settlers to sharpen weapons and tools. The Park of Roses consists of 13 acres within Whetstone Park.

In the early 1950s the American Rose Society, headquartered in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, was looking for a new home. The Society wanted a place with ample land for a “showcase” rose garden, but also a governmental and community commitment to maintain the garden. In 1952 Columbus Mayor Rhodes, City Council and the newly created Columbus Rose Commission invited Executive Director Dr. Ray Allen, President C. Eugene Pfister and ARS to move the Society to Columbus. The ARS Board of Directors voted to accept the invitation, and the move was made in December, 1953. Significant factors in making this decision were:

1. Columbus would provide a suitable headquarters building (\$1 per year lease) with land for display and test gardens including maintenance.
2. It was located near the geographical center of the Society’s membership.
3. It had excellent transportation facilities
4. It was a major convention center.

On Sunday, April 20, 1952, the day after Columbus City Council had approved the expenditure of \$205,000 and the day after the ARS Board had voted to move to Columbus, The *Columbus Citizen* headlined “COLUMBUS ROSE CAPITAL OF WORLD”. Planning of the Park of Roses began immediately and construction followed within a month. There was no time to waste, for planting of the roses was scheduled for the fall of 1952 and spring of 1953, the garden was to be dedicated in the summer of 1953, Columbus was hosting the ARS Fall National Convention in 1953, and ARS headquarters was moving to Columbus and the Park of Roses in December, 1953. The 13-acre site of the garden was ideal from the standpoint of natural boundaries and air and water drainage. It is bounded on the south and east by a ravine of considerable natural beauty, on the north by a line of large trees, and to the west it slopes down to a beautiful meadow and the Olentangy River which are about 25 feet below the garden.

OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP: Park of Roses, 'Veterans' Honor' and 'Julia Child', BOTTOM: 'Alba Semi-plena'. Photos Jim Hering

The garden was designed in the formal Italianate garden landscape style of geometric shapes and symmetry. The site is roughly a right triangle with two main axes, a larger one running east and west and a shorter one running north and south, intersecting the principal axis near the west end. A major feature of the design is wide walks and pathways. To facilitate ease and economy in maintenance, the more than one mile of walkways are hard surfaced and 12 to 20 feet wide, accommodating trucks and large spray equipment. Minor pathways have a minimum width of six feet to provide for mowing equipment. The designers realized that architectural features are important to make the garden appeal to the public. Pools, fountains, trellises, arbors, pergolas, gazebos and an observation tower were incorporated into the master plan and have been added over the past 60 years. In 2012 the original 1957 fountain was renovated and re-engineered for water conservation. In 2017, replacing old wooden trellises, an expansive northwest entrance of stone pillars and iron trellises was completed as a fitting complement to this elegant garden.

In 1952 test holes dug at various places in the garden showed that there were 18 to 22 inches of silt loam top soil, under which were stratified shale and sandy clay which, along with the grade of the garden, insured extremely good drainage. The rose beds were laid out, and a back-hoe excavated the soil in each bed to a depth of 20-24 inches. The soil was hauled to a preparation area where it was mixed with 30 percent by volume of peat moss and a 5-10-5 commercial fertilizer. After the excavated beds were treated with a two-inch layer of peat moss and 18 percent phosphate fertilizer, the prepared soil was replaced in the beds. A total of 5,000 cubic yards of soil was excavated and mixed with 21,000 bales of peat moss. During the bed preparation period, a large quantity of eight, four, two- and one-inch galvanized pipe, weighing 56 tons, was laid for the watering system.

The original plans of the garden called for an initial planting of 22,000 rose bushes with future expansion to as many as 55,000. In November, 1952, 2,000 hybrid teas were planted, and the remaining 20,000 in late March and early April, 1953, by which time the beds had settled to their permanent level. Bud unions were set at ground level and spaced on 24-inch centers. Over the years the number of rose bushes has increased and decreased. The Park of Roses now features greater than 11,000 modern large flowered bushes, collections, heritage roses, specialized gardens of herbs and perennials, a “Backyard Garden” demonstrating bulbs,







perennials, shrubs and trees designed to give visitors creative ideas for their own gardens, and an arboretum with more than 138 varieties of trees and shrubs.

On June 6, 1953, the Columbus Park of Roses formally opened, but the official dedication was postponed until the 13th of September to coincide with the American Rose Society's National Convention held in Columbus at that time. In December, ARS moved its headquarters from Harrisburg to the new Rose Commission Building at the Park of Roses. ARS' new Executive Director was James Gurney, and Niels J. Hansen was President. The Society signed a 25-year lease with the city of Columbus for one dollar per year. During the next two decades the Park of Roses flourished, and Columbus was indeed the Rose Capital of America. In June of 1963, the ARS National Convention was again held in Columbus and the 10th annual opening of the Park of Roses was celebrated.

When Lester Satterlee became President in 1968, Dr. Ray Allen was appointed chairman of a Long-Range Planning Committee to develop plans for the Society when the lease with Columbus expired. It appeared that the City of Columbus would not renew the lease because the administration building was needed by its parks department. On behalf of ARS, Dr. Allen stated, "There was no desire to leave the Columbus area." An attempt was made to find other accommodations, but none could be found. As a result, at the Spring ARS Convention in 1968 the Board decided to explore other locations and plan financing of a National Rose Center. By the time of the Fall Convention in 1969, a proposal had been made by the City of Shreveport, Louisiana, and it was accepted by the ARS Board.

The City of Columbus did not want to lose the American Rose Society and offered the Society complete control and supervision of the Park of Roses if it would remain in Columbus. The Shreveport offer, however, was too good to pass up, and the ARS Board at the Spring National Convention in San Francisco in 1971 reaffirmed its decision to move from Columbus to Shreveport. Early in 1974 the move was made. Ironically, the ARS Fall National Convention in 1973 was held in Columbus, and Dr. Ray Allen, who was the ARS Executive Director at the time of the move from Harrisburg in 1954, was ARS President when the move was made to Shreveport.

OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP TO BOTTOM, LEFT TO RIGHT: Columbus Park of Roses, 'Carefree Delight', 'Belinda', Park of Roses entrance and 'Winner's Circle', 'Flower Girl'. All photos Jim Hering.

About the time of ARS' move to Shreveport, the Columbus Division of Parks and Forestry was no longer able to supply sufficient funds to support the Park of Roses. This led to the formation of the Columbus Park of Roses Foundation to undertake programs or projects for the improvement or maintenance of the park. In 1975, a brick gazebo/bandstand, originally constructed in 1878 on the Fort Hayes Military Reservation in Columbus, was renovated and permanently relocated to the amphitheater in the Park of Roses. The gazebo serves as a site for weddings, concerts, lectures, theatrical productions and readings of poetry. The park hosts more than 100 weddings a season and musical concerts from June to September.

In 1985 the Heritage Garden was established to provide an exhibition of roses from the past, renowned for their inherent beauty and also for their significant contribution to the evolution of the rose as we know it today. Hundreds of specimens of Old Garden Rose varieties are presented in the garden.

The shelter house, at the west end of the garden, between the garden and the Olentangy River, is the focal point for activities in the park. It is the oldest structure in the Park of Roses and has had a major renovation with the addition of air-conditioning. Horticultural meetings as well as wedding receptions are held there.

The Columbus Park of Roses is indebted to the American Rose Society, perhaps not for its existence, but certainly for its size and its outstanding landscape design. The garden was developed on a grandiose scale in order to attract ARS from Harrisburg. Twenty years later, when ARS had departed for Shreveport, the citizens of Columbus were determined to maintain this magnificent garden of which they were so proud. The garden is now 66 years old, and it has taken its place among the finest gardens of the world. It is maintained by a staff of one full-time garden supervisor and two part-time seasonal garden employees as well as a large team of volunteers consisting of gardeners from the Columbus area, Master Gardeners and Columbus area rosarians. The Park of Roses is managed by the Columbus Recreation and Parks Department which partners with The Columbus Park of Roses Foundation to promote the gardens as well as provide support for the care and enhancement of the gardens through fund-raising and volunteer opportunities. It is one of the largest municipal rose gardens in the United States and one of the major tourist attractions in Columbus.