

Despite virus cancellations, City of Roses is in full bloom

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The Oregonian/OregonLive

As coronavirus spread across Oregon, the Portland Rose Festival announced plans to postpone its festivities.

That might work for carnivals, parades and coronations.

But for roses?

“Well, from a rose prospective, you don’t really postpone the roses,” said Kimberly Bown, this year’s prime minster of the Royal Rosarians. “Spring and roses will not be denied.”

In the Rose City, Portland’s signature flowers have reached peak bloom, virus or no. You can still see them throughout the city, though events associated with the roses have been either canceled or modified.

The largest rose show in the country, the Portland Rose Society Spring Rose Show, which was scheduled for June 4-5, won’t happen this year. The society is still hoping to host its fall show.

And the Royal Rosarian Home Garden Contest, a tradition since 1938, has morphed for 2020 into a nonjudged celebration called Roses for Hope.

In a normal year, teams of judges from the Royal Rosarian fraternal organization and the Portland Rose Society would visit home gardens throughout the Metro area, grading gardens based on traits such as visibility, bloom quality, disease- resistance and maintenance.

Instead, rose growers were invited to register their streetside gardens this year for passersby to view. More than 100 homes signed up, and can be found on an online map provided by the Rose Festival.

For roses that aren’t visible to the public, gardeners can still participate by sharing photos of their flowers on social media with the hashtag #rosesforhope.

In place of an awards ceremony, usually held at the International Rose Test Garden, the Royal Rosarians will host a virtual celebration over Zoom at 6:30 p.m. June 16. Anyone who participates either on the map or with the hashtag also will be entered into a raffle to

win a free rose bush. Mya Brazile, 2019 Rose Festival queen, will chose the winners during the Zoom event. Speakers from the Portland Rose Society and the Royal Rosarians will offer a history of the Rose City, along with gardening tips and a Q&A about growing roses.

The “City of Roses” has been officially recognized as Portland’s nickname since 2003, but the city’s history with roses goes back more than 100 years.

“In the late 1800s, really who got it all started was Georgiana Pittock and her love for roses,” Bown said.

Georgiana was the wife of Henry Pittock, publisher of The Oregonian. A gardener when the modern rose hybrid came into prominence, she discovered what many Portlanders now know: The Willamette Valley’s cool spring nights and temperate winters encourage massive rose blooms.

Georgiana Pittock established the Portland Rose Society in 1889. “It was the first of its kind in the country, there was no American Rose Society, it’s all started here,” Bown

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said. “That idea of cutting a flower, putting it in a vase and judging it against others became a really wonderful annual event with her and her lady friends, and it has grown and bloomed beyond belief.”

The movement to make Portland the “Rose City” started among preparations for the 1905 Lewis and Clark Exposition, a four-month festival celebrating the centennial of Lewis and Clark’s exploration of the American West. In the years leading up to the exposition, the Portland Rose Society suggested planting roses all along the city’s streets. In December 1901, an article ran in The Oregonian titled, “Make Portland the ‘Rose City,’” urging the community to get behind the project.

“Thousands and thousands of this light pink, Madame Caroline Testout rose were the ones that were planted here, 50,000 of them in Portland, and you can still see some of them today,” said Gretchen Humphrey, a past-president of the Portland Rose Society.

In perhaps a dozen spots throughout the city, those original bushes still bloom. The largest collection is in the East Garden of Ladd’s Addition, where you can find an entire bed of 1901 Madame Caroline Testout roses.

The 1905 exposition, and the roses, were a hit and inspired then Mayor Harry Lane to propose an annual festival of roses. The first Rose Festival was held in 1907.

In 1912, the Royal Rosarians were formed, with Henry Pittock as a founding member. The group was devoted to promoting roses as a tourism and economic asset for the city. The Royal Rosarians are still the “official greeters and ambassadors of goodwill” for the city of Portland.

There are about 280 Royal Rosarians today, who appear at various city festivals and events. Their distinctive uniform of white suits and straw boater hats has changed little over the past century, though they did ditch their white ties for red ones with the invention of color television.

In 1915, Jesse A. Currey, then president of the Portland Rose Society and Sunday editor of the Oregon Journal, asked city officials to establish a rose test garden to serve as a safe haven for hybrid roses grown in Europe during World War I. The International Rose Test Garden was created in 1917.

“We have companies from around the world that send their roses here to be tested,” said Rachel Burlington, the garden’s curator. “We’re looking for disease resistance, and is it a nice, full vigorous plant.”

Though it was closed for a time during the coronavirus pandemic, the International Rose Test Garden at Washington Park reopened on May 22. This is the perfect time of year to see one of the world’s most famous rose gardens in peak bloom.

You can get up close to smell the flowers, just stay six feet away from the others in the garden.



Madame Caroline Testout roses, planted in 1901, brighten the Ladd’s Addition East Garden. The roses, planned ahead of the Lewis and Clark Exposition in 1905, gave Portland the nickname the Rose City. Samantha Swindler, staff

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