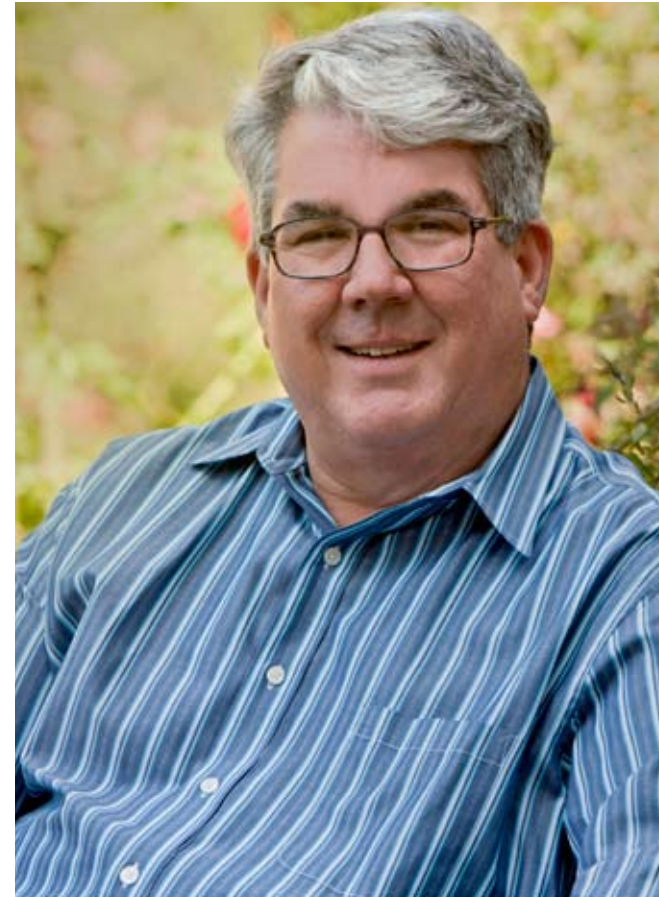


Tom Carruth

by Michael Kardos



All photos by Gene Sasse

Decide early, work hard, get lucky and then enjoy an amazing career is an apt description of

Tom Carruth's success as a rose hybridizer and world respected rose authority.

Since he was seven years old, Tom Carruth knew he wanted to work with roses. His love-at-first-sight moment came when he spotted a 'Sterling Silver' hybrid tea blooming by a Texas neighbor's nearby front porch. Smitten, and so certain of his career decision, he felt compelled to tell his father. But when informed of the young boy's momentous decision, the best his father could muster was a confused and bewildered look.

"He thought I wanted to be a florist," Carruth said with a chuckle.

But clearly, it was a wise decision, the one made more than 50 years ago, because once he started, Tom Carruth went on to breed more than 100 different roses, become one of the most respected rose hybridizers in America, receive 11 All-America Rose Selections awards in just 14 years, have his work

beautify gardens around the world, and in February 2012 he was named to the prestigious position as Curator of the Rose Garden at The Huntington, Library, Art Collection, and Botanical Gardens in San Marino, CA.

But even as a kid, Carruth was serious about roses. He planted his first garden when he was 10. He purchased the plants, "from Interstate Nursery, eight different colors and a free 'Peace' rose," he recalled fondly.

But it wasn't just pretty blooms and alluring scents that drew him to roses. "In high school, genetics were just fascinating. When I found out there was such a thing as plant breeders, it was a perfect combination. Just about that time we moved to Dallas and there was a miniature rose breeder working out of his back yard named Ernie Williams. Every time a school

project came up I would bug the heck out of this poor man and write about rose breeding. When I got into Texas A&M, I was very fortunate to have J.C. Raulston as one of my professors," Carruth recounted.

Raulston is considered one of the most significant horticulturists of the late 20th Century. But it turned out the esteemed professor was no fan of roses. "When I asked if we were going to breed any roses, he would laugh and pat me on the back," Carruth said. He went on to obtain a bachelor's degree in horticulture and two years later a master's degree in plant breeding. With his sights set on a job, Carruth was after roses.



Fellow Texas Aggie Mary Irish, now a writer, recalled the days she and Carruth were students at A&M. She recounted how well suited Carruth was to plant breeding. For example, he had a real aptitude for scientific classification, and while many students struggled with taxonomy, Carruth showed a flair for it. Irish told how their plant breeding education began with cucumbers, in an effort to create a better vegetable. Irish remembered Carruth not being particularly fond of cucumbers, because they had to taste the hybrids. Some of the cross breeds were very bitter, she recalled with a smile.

Back during those college years, rose breeders were generally a secretive bunch not prone to sharing knowledge. The business was more of a family affair, passed to the next generation, in a time before corporations became the standard business model. The closed, clubby nature of the industry made it tough for an outsider to break into. But one day, preparation, "total luck" and good timing combined, and Carruth seized his moment.

As he explained, "One of my fellow grad students had written to Bill Warriner at Jackson & Perkins and he was kind enough to answer some questions. When she finished her report we were leaving the room and I saw her throw the envelope in the trash. I asked if I could have it because it had Bill's address on it. I sent a blind resume and got hired. They were looking for someone to begin training as his assistant and that's what brought me to California."

One reason for Carruth's success is his continued interest in learning. "My greatest teacher was at my first job with Jackson & Perkins. But it wasn't Bill Warriner the breeder it was the guy who was the president, Dave Stone. He was a marketing genius. He was the one who made J&P into the great monster that it was. He brought home the power of knowledge," Carruth said, pointing out that J&P was the first to add fragrance to their catalogs.

	4/2/2004	52	Monday	
	4/3/2004	—	Tuesday	
		—	Wednesday	
		—	Thursday	
		133	Friday	
		—	Saturday	
		263	Sunday	
		—	Monday	
		—	Tuesday	
		—	Wednesday	
		762	Thursday	
ay	4/14/2004	344	Saturday	5/27/2004
	4/15/2004	431	Sunday	
	4/16/2004	1352	Monday	5/25/2004
	4/17/2004	—	Tuesday	6/2
	4/18/2004	—	Wednesday	5/26/2004
	4/19/2004	—	Thursday	5/27/2004
	4/20/2004	1162	Friday	
ay	4/21/2004	801	Saturday	
	4/22/2004	698	Sunday	
	4/23/2004	951	Monday	
	4/24/2004	2006	Tuesday	
	4/25/2004	—	Wednesday	
	4/26/2004	—	Thursday	
	4/27/2004	2214	Friday	6/4/2004
ay	4/28/2004	1996	Saturday	6/5/2004
	4/29/2004	1260	Sunday	6/6/2004
	4/30/2004	822	Monday	6/7/2004
	5/1/2004	1585	Tuesday	6/8/2004
	5/2/2004	—	Wednesday	6/9/2004
	5/3/2004	—	Thursday	6/10/2004
	5/4/2004	2118	Friday	6/11/2004
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Carruth would go on to work at Armstrong and in 1998 joined Weeks Roses as the Director of Research, Marketing and Licensing, until 2011.

Maxine Gilliam is well known in the rose industry for her work in research and marketing. With more than 50 years experience working for Armstrong, and later Weeks, much of her career overlapped with Carruth's, so she can speak firsthand about his impact and style.

"Tom and I clicked from the beginning. He is totally professional, knowledgeable and fair to everyone. He welcomes ideas. It takes a special talent to grow something that is marketable, disease resistant, has exciting color and a wonderful fragrance," she said. Gilliam stressed it can take eight to 10 years to breed a marketable rose. She said that Carruth's quick wit and inclusive nature, "made everyone feel they were part of the project." Gilliam pointed out Carruth was instrumental in facilitating Weeks' relationship with Cal Poly Pomona, providing the college and the company opportunities for synergy.

Photographer Gene Sasse also knows Carruth well, having worked closely with him in the production of Weeks' sales catalogs, a primary sales tool for any rose company. As Sasse explained, "Tom supervised the photography for the catalog and made it better than the competition and helped place them in the marketplace so they outdid the competition. He was a wonderful client to work with," Sasse said. This, despite the fact that it could take weeks or a month or more to

get a shot that did justice to Carruth's latest creation, Sasse said. But the results were worth it, stunning images that jumped off the page. And to make sure the descriptions showcased their very best qualities of the roses, Carruth wrote the catalog copy himself, giving it a bright and lively tone. Over the years, the Weeks rose catalog has come to be a welcome arrival at the homes of many rosarians.

Creating a beautiful rose is one thing, but giving it just the right name is another important aspect to creating a rose that succeeds in the marketplace. And as any rosarian knows, there are a large number of roses named after people. Among those are royalty,

American presidents, world leaders, movie stars, icons and famous people. Carruth has his share of celebrity roses and a few are stories are worthy of mention.

One story comes from Dan Bifano, a landscape designer specializing in creating rose gardens. Some of his well-known clients include Oprah Winfrey and Barbra Streisand. Bifano was working with Streisand and the topic of having a rose named after her came up. As many people know, Streisand is notorious for being actively engaged in a project and

How many AARS winners by Tom Carruth are in your garden?

1997 - 'Scentimental'
 1999 - 'Fourth of July'
 1999 - 'Betty Boop'
 2003 - 'Hot Cocoa'

2004 - 'Memorial Day'
 2005 - 'About Face'
 2006 - 'Wild Blue Yonder'
 2006 - 'Julia Child'

2007 - 'Strike It Rich'
 2009 - 'Cinco de Mayo'
 2011 - 'Dick Clark'



'Wild Blue Yonder'



'Ebb Tide'



'George Burns'



'Easy Does It'



'Marilyn Monroe'



'Barbra Streisand'



'Scentimental'

acutely aware of what she wants. If a rose has her name on it, she had an extensive list of what it must have. As Bifano recounts, Carruth was willing to meet the challenge and the result is a stunning lavender rose with a large flower and a fragrance that will fill a room. And Carruth is delighted that Streisand is an outstanding ambassador of her namesake rose, often including them on CD covers and talking about them in interviews.

Another of Carruth's "famous people" roses is 'Julia Child', a wonderfully scented, butter-yellow beauty with lots of bloom. Child, who led the revolution in American cuisine with the publication of her book, "Mastering the Art of French Cooking" had been circumspect throughout her career in not lending her name to products or to commercialize her name. Carruth would often send potential roses to highly regarded colleagues to test roses in real-world conditions.

One of those people was Danielle Hahn, owner of Rose Story Farm, in Carpinteria, CA. Rose Story Farm specializes in old roses, European varieties and pre-1950 hybrid teas. Carruth had sent some roses to

Hahn and she placed them in a spot on the 20-plus acres at Rose Story Farm.

It turns out Julia Child was a friend of the Hahn family, and as Hahn explained, Child "often came over for dinner and to enjoy the rose garden. One day, I was in the garden with Julia and she saw the beautiful yellow rose and thought it looked like the color of fresh cream butter. She said she would like the rose named after her. I called Tom to tell him Julia would like the rose named after her, but the immediate answer was the rose had been named. Shortly, I got a second phone call and was told Weeks would love to have the rose named after her."

With so many rose successes, Carruth has a simple answer to the notion that roses are a lot of work. "Buy the right variety. Put it in the right place. A constant question I get is, 'what roses can I grow in the shade?' and the answer is none. Yes, you can grow in the shade, [but they] get more diseases and [become] lanky," he advised.

And Carruth worries some rose aficionados might unknowingly create the impression roses are difficult.

"The aspect of showing roses, so avidly, can make the care sound all the more intimidating (to the novice). Then it's even less inviting to bring new people in," he said.

He suggested a number of things U.S. rosarians can do to attract new fans. "First, enter the modern world. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, all the social networks. The tough part is encompassing this broad spectrum of interests. You've got to talk about what an amateur needs to do and you have to talk to your show people and still talk to other people."

In a career that revolves around the cyclical nature of plants, Carruth's position as the Curator of the Rose Garden at The Huntington returns him to a place he has long enjoyed while allowing him to do something he loves. Carruth's home is nearby and for a couple of decades now he has volunteered at plant sales held during the year. ("Volunteers get first choice," he dishes.)

More seriously, he said, "The opportunity with The Huntington grew organically." The part-time position is a "great way to ease toward retirement, less stress,

keeps me involved with roses and people and it's closer to home. This was all just too good to let pass by," he said with a smile. Clair Martin, Curator Emeritus of the Rose Garden, is among the many to endorse Carruth. "It is a great pleasure to welcome Tom Carruth as the new Ruth B. and E. L. Shannon Curator of The Huntington Rose Garden. For over a century the Rose Garden has presented a broad selection of the best roses for Southern California and Tom's unique experience as an award winning hybridizer and educator will lead the garden into its next century," Martin praised.

And looking back over such an accomplished career, Carruth did not hesitate when asked what he might have done if he hadn't specialized in roses. "I'm pretty sure I'd still be with plants. It might be more toward a bearded iris or more flower oriented. Like most of the public, I'm captured by the flower."

He paused for a moment and then allowed that he might have become a chef. For rosarians around the world, it's a good thing that the kid Tom Carruth didn't spot a juicy steak being grilled that summer day in Texas. ■