

American Rose Contents

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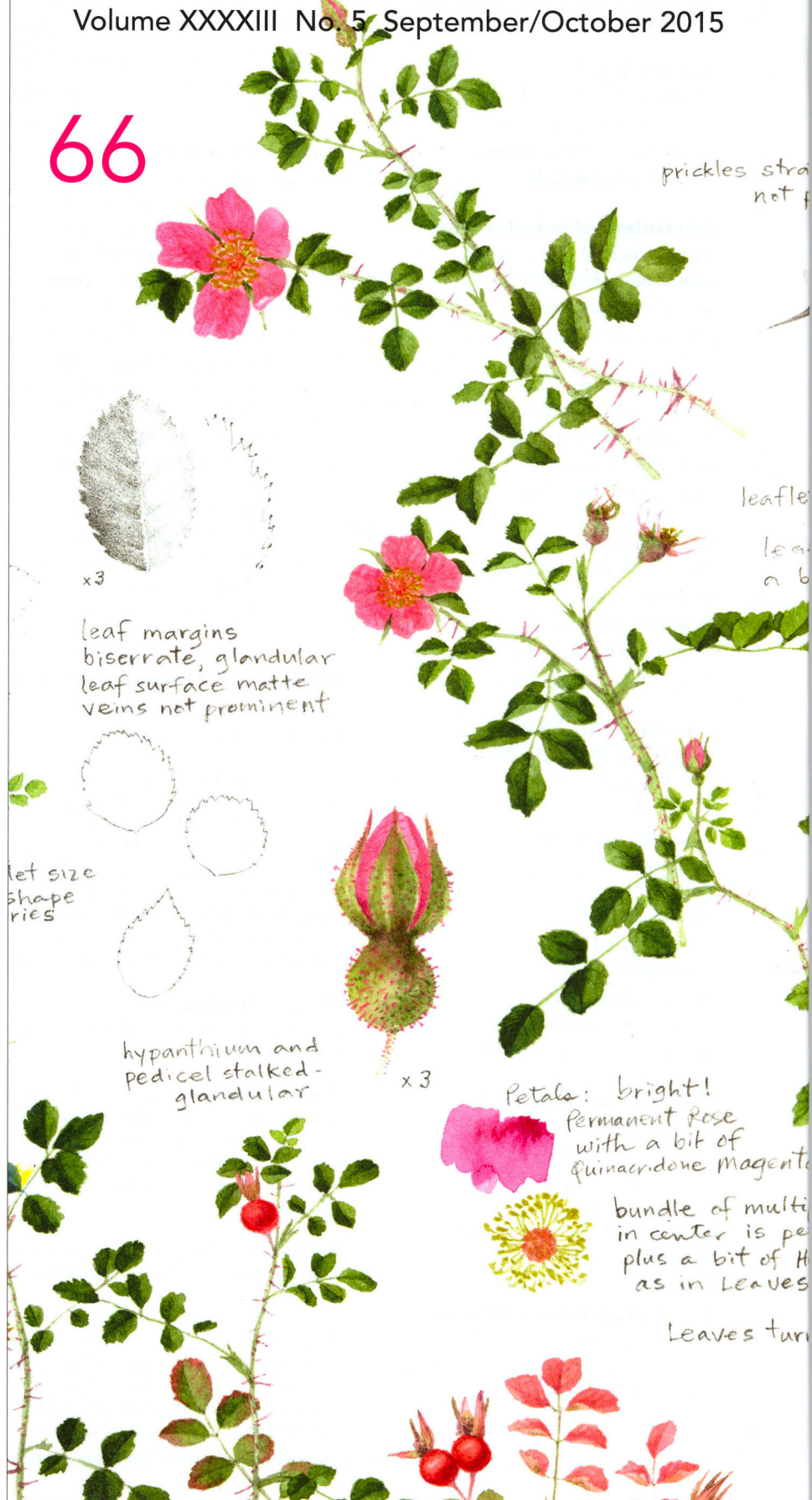
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Maria Cecilia Freeman in Italy

ROSES AND THE “ROSE STUDIES”

by *Maria Cecilia Freeman*

I GIORNI DELLE ROSE

All in the space of a few hours, late one afternoon at the end of May, the interior and grounds of Villa Fidelia near Spello, in the Umbrian region of central Italy, were transformed as if by magic into a brightly colored festival dedicated to the rose, I Giorni delle Rose — “The Days of Roses.” I was honored by an invitation to bring my collection of watercolors and drawings called “Rose Studies” to the 2015 iteration of this event.

Overnight, the gardens became a riot of roses brought by nurseries, breeders and garden supply companies from all over Italy. Among them and inside the villa were garden furniture displays and myriad booths of artisan crafts people showing rose-themed products of every description: perfumes, jewelry, fashion, ceramics, embroidery, edibles, interior design and more.

Local wineries and regional politicians were well represented, because this year the event promoted a campaign to line the local vineyards with roses, reviving an antique tradition. The roses serve as an early warning for powdery mildew and other diseases that attack both roses and grape vines, the roses a little earlier.

This annual three-day celebration of roses is sponsored and organized by the Garden Clubs of Perugia and Terni, and the provincial government of Perugia, which has owned Villa Fidelia since 1974. The villa is a palatial 17th-century country residence surrounded by once-lavish, extensive formal gardens with fountains, statuary and a small oratory dedicated to San Fedele. In 1930 it was the site of the wedding breakfast of Giovanna di Savoia, daughter of King Victor Emmanuel III, who married Tsar Boris III of Bulgaria in nearby Assisi.

Noting that history, the Bulgarian Ambassador to Italy inaugurated this year’s I Giorni delle Rose in opening ceremonies with the Mayor of Spello and the presidents of the Garden Clubs of Perugia and Terni. The Ambassador spoke about the Rose Valley region in cen-

tral Bulgaria, famed for its roses with a high percentage of essential oils. Bulgarian vendors brought a wide array



Maria Cecilia Freeman

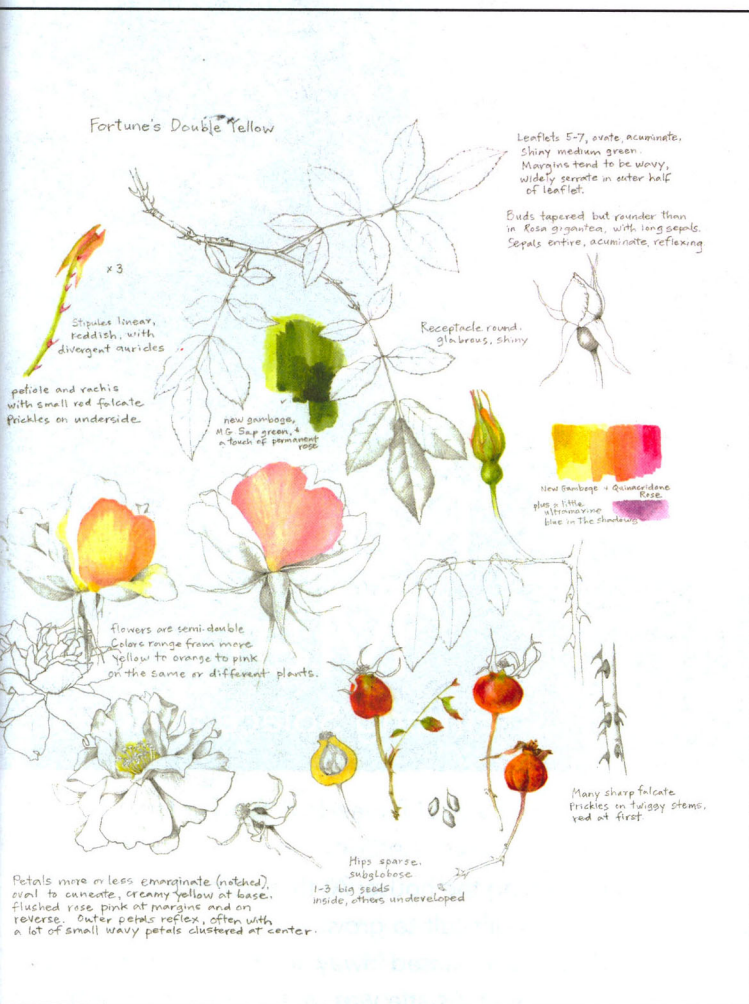
of perfumes and other rose oil products to the event.

I Giorni delle Rose is an all-volunteer production that has become one of the major annual garden events in Italy, attracting more than 20,000 visitors: rose-lovers of every type, botanists and other scientists, rose hybridizers, artists, garden clubs, families with children and citizens from all over central Italy. They came to Villa Fidelia to hear talks, poetry and concerts, browse

artisanal crafts, buy roses and view the annual botanical art exhibition — this year, my paintings and drawings of heritage roses.

BOTANICAL ART EXHIBITION

Upstairs in beautifully appointed rooms was the exhibition of my botanical art, “Rose Studies: watercolors and drawings.” In these pieces I combine graphite drawings, watercolors and textual annotation into a single work of art to document the distinctive botanical characteristics of a rose. The curator of my show in



'Fortune's Double Yellow'

Italy, botanical artist Rosemary Lucca, had been interested in these works from previous exhibitions of my Rose Studies at the Horticultural Society of New York and the San Francisco Botanical Garden in 2010–2011.

In Italy I found an enthusiastic audience for the paintings and the annotated drawings, which were received as an innovative approach to documentation of roses in art. Early visitors to the show were the noted

Italian rose hybridizers Davide della Libera of Novaspi-na, and Sergio Scuddu of S'Orrosa, who had brought stunning displays from their nurseries to Spello. They gave the artwork careful but approving scrutiny.

The Italian viewers showed a particular interest in species roses native to California, where I live, including *Rosa californica*, the California Wild Rose. The unexpected “star of the show” turned out to be my study of *Rosa spithamea*, the native Coast Ground Rose, which only grows about a foot high and flourishes after wildfires (like much of the endemic fire-adapted California flora). I had found a plant growing in a gravelly driveway in the Santa Cruz mountains, and studied and painted it life-size.

ROSES IN UMBRIA

Roses have a long popular tradition in Spello, as in Assisi and other medieval stone hilltop towns in Umbria. Old and modern roses grow around doorways, in terrace and rooftop gardens, in nooks and crannies in ancient stone walls. I suspect that many of the old roses predate the current residents. Heritage roses are favored, but David Austin's English roses are popular because of their “old-fashioned” appearance.

The region is home to some legendary rose gardens, including that of Helga Brichet, former President of the International Rose Federation, which features a collection of historic China roses and hybrid giganteas. I was amused to see how her *Rosa gigantea* and other big climbers were putting the old olive trees for which the region is known to a new use, as supports for their tall branching canes.

Roses are a popular subject in contemporary Italian botanical art, as well. Important examples are the work of Angelo Speziale, as well as artists Rosemary Lucca and Aurora Tazza, whose show “Rose & Rose” was on view in Pisa in May and June, featuring historic Italian roses.

On the last evening in May, like Brigadoon, the festival of roses at Villa Fidelia ended and disappeared. In the morning no one was there except a couple loading trash bags into their little Fiat to haul away. The grounds were clean and the rooms empty. Villa Fidelia faces uncertain prospects given uncertain government jurisdiction and funding, but there is no question about the ardor for roses in Umbria, and I Giorni delle Rose, “The Days of Roses” of the future — look for it to happen again at the end of May 2016.