



# Encounters with America's Premier Nursery and Botanic Garden

THE YEAR WAS 1791, and Thomas Jefferson, then Secretary of State under George Washington, was embroiled in various political and personal matters. His ideological vision for America, in conflict with the governmental system espoused by Alexander Hamilton, was causing political relationships to crumble and his already strained friendship with John Adams to deteriorate further. Consequently, Jefferson's month-long "botanizing excursion" through New England with James Madison in June was the subject of much speculation that summer. Hamilton and other political adversaries were convinced that this lengthy vacation of two Republican Virginians through Federalist strongholds in the North had secret, ulterior motives. It would seem likely that, as Jefferson historian Merrill Peterson surmised, while the two future presidents "bounced along in leisurely fashion, their conversation must have turned occasionally to politics." Yet, apparently the trip was innocent of intrigue and intended exclusively for, in Madison's words, "health recreation and curiosity." This goal was successfully achieved, for both Jefferson's "periodical" migraines and Madison's "bilious attacks" vanished in the nearly four weeks they spent walking over historic battlefields, studying botanical curiosities, wildlife and

insects (including "musketoes" and the Hessian fly), recording observations on climate, the seasons and the appearance of birds, and even boating and fishing in Lake George and Lake Champlain.

Their journey did, nevertheless, incorporate elements of a working vacation, for Jefferson was seeking ways to advance the new nation through alternative domestic industries. He believed his most recent idea—the addition "to the products of the U. S. of three such articles as oil, sugar, and upland rice"—would lessen America's reliance on foreign trade, improve the lot of farmers, and ultimately result in the abolition of slavery itself. At that time a Quaker activist and philanthropist Dr. Benjamin Rush of Philadelphia, himself an ardent opponent of slavery, was seeking ways to convince political leaders and slave owners to create a sugar maple industry in America, convinced it would "lessen or destroy the consumption of West Indian sugar, and thus indirectly to destroy negro slavery." Jefferson took up the cause of Benjamin Rush, becoming a conscientious consumer of maple sugar much in the way that modern environmental activists boycott plantation grown coffee today. In a letter to a friend in England, Jefferson expressed the political and humanitarian



benefits of commercial independence when he wrote, “What a blessing to substitute a sugar which requires only the labour of children, for that which it is said renders the slavery of the blacks necessary.”

## The Princes of New York

In their quest for the sugar maple, Jefferson and Madison made a noteworthy visit to the Prince Family Nursery in Flushing on the north shore of Long Island, New York. Established on eight acres of land in the 1730s by Robert Prince—within a community chiefly of French Huguenot settlers—it became America’s first commercial nursery and remained a thriving family business through four generations, until just after the Civil War. Initially called the “Old American Nursery,” it soon became the largest supplier of fruit trees and grapes in the New World, producing most of the grafted apple, pear, and cherry trees that could be found in early northeastern orchards.

Robert’s son William Prince, the nursery’s second proprietor and the one who was in charge at the time of Jefferson’s visit, was the first to propagate the native pecan commercially. In 1771, the nursery’s first broadside advertised 33 different plum trees, 42 pear trees, 24 apple trees and 12 varieties of nectarines. Their offerings expanded and diversified by 1774, when they listed in the *New York Mercury*, “Carolina Magnolia flower trees, the most beautiful trees that grow in America, and 50 large Catalpa flower trees” along with other flowering trees and shrubs. The Prince Nursery was among the first to introduce Lombardy poplars and, in 1798, they advertised ten thousand trees. The nursery continued its focus on fruits and, according to U. P. Hedrick, “the first planned attempt to improve fruit on a large scale began in the Prince Nursery” with their work on plum seedlings.

Although the American Revolutionary War had led to a seven-year occupation of



*This sugar maple, which died in 1992, was the last survivor of Jefferson’s 1791 maple grove.*

Long Island by the British, the by-then successful and well-known nursery suffered little, for it was guarded by British General Lord Howe and his troops, who were interested in protecting the property for its contents. Following the war, an excellent demand for American shrubs ensued, as the former enemy soldiers shipped plants home to their gardens in England and Germany.

When William, in his advanced years, divided the operation between his two sons, Benjamin and William, the second William Prince purchased additional acreage nearby and, in 1793, began “The Linnaean Botanic Garden and Nursery.” Named for Carolus Linnaeus, the renowned Swedish botanist and naturalist who a mere half-century earlier had devised the system of plant classification called binomial nomenclature, William Prince’s Linnaean Botanic Garden served to educate the public as well as encourage potential customers by displaying the richness and diversity of the world’s botanical treasures.

As the Prince family nursery passed from father to son, each generation shared a common, underlying goal: to propagate and make available every known plant of merit, including North American species, not so much for profit



as from a deep-rooted love of botany and the discipline of horticulture itself. This scientific approach toward the natural world was an attitude in keeping with the essential philosophical tenets also embraced by Jefferson and many of his contemporaries.

William Prince became an active member of the newly created New York Horticultural Society. Through this prestigious organization he was in fellowship with Dr. David Hosack, who established the Elgin Botanic Garden in 1801, the city's original botanical garden, which

now lies directly beneath the present Rockefeller Center. Prince nurseries supplied Dr. Hosack with many of the trees for his 700-acre estate on the Hudson River, Hyde Park.

William's son, William Robert Prince was the fourth and final generation to oversee the family enterprise. William Robert operated the nursery more as a botanical garden and, as a young man, he accompanied professor John Torrey, of Columbia University, and Thomas Nuttall, of Harvard, on botanical forays and plant collecting expeditions throughout the entire length of the Atlantic States. He would later publish two important books on fruits, *A Treatise on the Vine* and *A Pomological Manual*, which became standard references for decades. Likewise, the Prince catalogs from 1815 through 1850 became common resources for horticulturists of all sorts. His now rare manuscript, *Manual of Roses*, published in 1846, two years after Robert Buist's seminal volume *The Rose Manual*, firmly established him as a premier authority on roses of the 19th century. But, his unwavering zeal to import white mulberry trees and promote the silkworm industry nearly bankrupted the family business. Although the nursery operations ended after William Robert Prince's death in 1869, many unusual trees and shrubs flourished on the property and throughout Flushing well into the 20th century. In her book, *Old Time Gardens Newly Set Forth*, published in 1901, Alice Morse Earle describes the "oldest Chinese magnolias" and the "finest Cedar of Lebanon in the United States" still standing in the forlorn and forgotten garden at the Prince homestead.

## Exploring the Nursery in Flushing

Two years prior to Jefferson's and Madison's journey to Flushing, two other notable American statesmen paid a visit to the Prince Nursery. In October 1789, when

Following trees.

1	6 Sugar Maple trees of 4	3-2-0
2	6 Norway Spruce	4-0-0
3	3 Balsam Poplar	4-0-0
4	6 Northern Spruce	4-0-0
5	2 Sweet Birch	4-0-0
6	4 Norway Spruce	4-0-0
7	2 1/2 Roman Plectranthus	4-0-0
8	2 Large early Apricot	4-0-0
9	2 Bushy	4-0-0
10	4 Roman	4-0-0
11	4 Yellow Roman	4-0-0
12	4 Green	4-0-0
13	4 Yellow	4-0-0
14	4 Large	4-0-0
15	2 Large	4-0-0
16	2	4-0-0
17	2	4-0-0
18	2	4-0-0
19	2	4-0-0
20	2	4-0-0
21	2	4-0-0
22	2	4-0-0
23	2	4-0-0
24	2	4-0-0
25	2	4-0-0
26	2	4-0-0
27	2	4-0-0
28	2	4-0-0
29	2	4-0-0
30	2	4-0-0
31	2	4-0-0
32	2	4-0-0
33	2	4-0-0

Make the trees on each in 2-6-0

1791 invoice of Jefferson's order from William Prince.



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1876 birds-eye view of Flushing, New York.

the seat of American government was in New York City, George Washington, accompanied by vice president John Adams, “set off from New York, about nine o’clock in my barge, to visit Mr. Prince’s fruit gardens and shrubberies at Flushing.” Although his assessment would improve upon later visits, President Washington was unimpressed with what he saw during his first, noting “these gardens, except in the number of young fruit trees, did not answer my expectations. The shrubs were trifling and the flowers not numerous.”

Jefferson, on the other hand, certainly saw much that interested him. He began that summer day by making the following entry in his Memorandum Book: “June 15, 1791. Hamstead. breakfd. —went to Prince’s at Flushing.” While at the home of William Prince, Jefferson left a note requesting “all you have” of sugar

maples and bush cranberries (*Viburnum trilobum*) as well as three balsam poplars, six Venetian “sumachs” (*Cotinus obovatus*), and twelve “Bursé” (*Beurré Gris*) pears. Later that year Jefferson would receive sixty sugar maple trees, Prince’s entire stock, which were subsequently planted “in a grove” below the Second Roundabout on the northeast slope of Monticello mountain. This became Jefferson’s experiment in sugar production at Monticello. Eventually, it was found that the central Virginia climate was not ideally suited for adequate



POMONA LONDINENSIS

*Beurré Gris Pear*

sap flow in the spring, and Jefferson’s well-intended project proved unsuccessful. While a national commercial sugar industry never took hold, Jefferson continued to advocate the sugar maple on a household level by stating there was no reason why every farmer “should not have a sugar orchard, as well as an apple orchard.”

But, William Prince’s 1791 shipment of plants—which arrived at Monticello in early December, nearly a month after Prince’s





November 8 invoice—was substantially larger than the original limited request Jefferson made in June. Jefferson had taken a copy of Prince’s catalog and obviously had studied it thoroughly, for the following month, when in Philadelphia, he wrote an enormous addendum to his original short list, explaining “To [my original order] I must now desire you to add the following; the names of which I take from your catalogue.”

Jefferson expanded his fruit order to include Brignole plums, apricots, Red and Yellow Roman nectarines, Green Nutmeg peaches, Yellow October and Lemon Clingstone peaches, and Spitzenburg apples, as well as Madeira walnuts (*Juglans regia*) and filberts. The fruits, according to the planting instructions Jefferson prepared at the time he placed the order, were to be planted “in the vacant places” of his South orchard, while the Madeira walnuts were to be “among the trees on the S.W. slope...towards the grove,” and the filberts were for the “room of the square of figs.”

He enhanced his selection of native and ornamental trees and shrubs with

## Monticello Apples

The Center for Historic Plants sells several varieties of apple trees for spring planting. (Not available after March.)

*Esopus Spitzenburg Apple*



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ROGER YERSEN

an eclectic collection, intended primarily for planting either in the various clumps of trees on the slopes of the mountain or for the “vacancies of the 4 clumps at the corners of the house.” These included three types of conifers: “Hemlock spruce” (*Tsuga canadensis*), “large silver” (*Abies alba*), and “balm of Gilead” or balsam fir (*Abies balsamina*), as well as balsam poplars, “Carolina kidney bean trees with purple flowers” (native wisteria, *Wisteria frutescens*), “Balsam of Peru” (*Myroxylon balsaminum*), Rhododendrons, and cuttings of yellow, or golden willows. The “monthly honeysuckles” (possibly the



QUEENS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

*The Prince homestead, Flushing, New York.*

native *Lonicera sempervirens*) were for the base of weeping willows.

And finally, quite significantly, Jefferson went through Prince's entire inventory of roses and specified three each of all ten varieties the nursery had to offer that year. In fact, this extensive assortment of rose varieties has proved to be the richest and most comprehensive documentation of Jefferson roses presently known. (See pages 16–17 for list and descriptions.) These thirty shrubs were to be planted around the clumps of lilacs at the East Front of the house.

The quantity and diversity of trees and shrubs Jefferson purchased from Prince in 1791 vividly exemplified the evolution and complexity of his long-ranging aspirations for Monticello.

Jefferson's subsequent associations with the Prince Nursery were few and indirect. A notable connection occurred years after the Jefferson inspired Lewis and Clark Expedition, when the Prince nurseries played a leading role in making commercially available one of the expedition's most ornamental species, the Oregon grape-holly (*Mabonia aquifolium*). According to Stephen Spongberg in *A Reunion of Trees*, the demand for this novel shrub was staggering. "By 1825, when the plant had become widely known up and down the Atlantic seaboard, the Prince Nursery firm...listed plants in their catalogue at twenty-five dollars each, in today's currency doubtless equivalent to several hundreds of dollars!"

A final occasion connecting Jefferson with Prince was in a more intellectual way, as part of a poignant tribute made during Jefferson's later years. In 1823 Dr. Samuel Latham Mitchill, Jefferson's former Lieutenant in Congress and fellow enthusiast for newly discovered inventions and natural productions, sent Jefferson an unusual invitation. Mitchill proposed that, as honorary members of the Linnaean Society of Paris, the two should simultaneously observe the May 24th birthday



*Oregon Grape-Holly*

of Carolus Linnaeus, the man who united "all nations under one language in natural history." Mitchill planned to celebrate at Prince's garden in Flushing, New York, and promised to think of Jefferson on the occasion, knowing that he would "not disapprove of an attempt to render science popular and attractive." Although not known for certain, it is likely that Prince family members were among those gathered to raise a toast to Linnaeus. Jefferson assured Mitchill that he likewise would be with them in spirit from his Bedford, Virginia retreat Poplar Forest, where he planned to invite "some amateurs in natural science in [the] neighborhood to fraternize on the same day with their brethren of New York by corresponding libations to the great apostle of Nature." Unbeknownst to Jefferson, this commemoration would be on the final day of his final stay at Poplar Forest.

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## The Princes' Roses

To understand the significance of Jefferson's 1791 rose order from William Prince, some perspective is needed. At that time, America's love affair with the rose was barely beginning, and the Prince Nursery list was typical of what was obtainable in the United States. Although British and European gardens were acquainted with upwards of 200 roses by the 1780s, in America the selection, especially of home produced roses, was more limited; and nurseries relied on imported roses from England through the turn of the century. It is important to keep in mind that while Bernard McMahon's appendix to his 1806 edition of *The American Gardener's Calendar* contained 83 rose varieties, this is misleading. Benjamin Prince's catalog of the early 1820s included a meager 24 rose varieties actually propagated at the nursery in Flushing, New York, and issued the following caveat with regard to the imported offerings:

"...many of them, from the droughts of our summers, are difficult to propagate in America, the earth below the layers being too dry to admit of their striking roots; from which circumstance it is almost impossible to keep an assortment of them, unless newly imported, to supply the demand, which cannot be done at a price that would be satisfactory."

In the first two decades of the 19th century interest in developing and improving roses gained momentum, especially with the introduction of ever-blooming sorts from China. These new varieties from the East created a sea change in rose breeding, which continues to this



*Blush Noisette*

day. One well-known class of roses, the Noisettes, began in the early 1800s with the marriage of 'Old Blush' China and the

English musk rose, resulting in a desirable offspring bearing clusters of fragrant, pastel pink to white blossoms throughout the season. When John Champneys first recognized this chance hybrid that bloomed repeatedly in his Charleston, South Carolina garden he

sent two tubs of seedlings to William Prince, believing it to be a potentially noteworthy rose for the nursery trade. His discovery, which he called 'Champneys Pink Cluster', is now considered America's first rose hybrid.

Champneys also shared seedlings with his neighbor, Philippe Noisette, whose brother was a skilled rose breeder in Paris.

### *Noisette Roses*

#### 'Blush Noisette'

*Rosa x noisettiana* hybrid Phillippe Noisette's rose sent to his brother Louis in Paris by 1817. Fully double, blush pink flowers; petals larger and more refined than 'Champneys'. Deep rose buds. Fragrant. Four to five feet. Full sun. Zones 7-9.

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## More Roses from Monticello

The following roses are available for *Spring 2004* delivery only. The last day to order is *June 6, 2004*.

### 'Great Maiden's Blush' or 'Maiden's Blush' *NEW*

*Rosa x alba* cv. Ancient European rose cultivated since the 15th century or earlier. Maiden's Blush exhibits all the best attributes of the Albas: charming, apple-blossom blush-pink flowers, superb and refined fragrance, and exceptionally healthy, blue-gray foliage. Jefferson's 1791 order from Prince included an Alba rose. Six-foot shrub. Zones 6-9.

### Double Musk Rose ("Temple" form) *NEW*

*Rosa moschata plena* The ancient European musk rose, cultivated since the 1500s, was rediscovered in the 20th century by British and American rose experts. It produces clusters of snowy white, intensely fragrant blossoms in mid-late summer. The "Temple Musk" is a name applied to an especially refined double sport found on the original rediscovered shrub in Richmond's Hollywood Cemetery. Availability of this variety is extremely limited. Five feet. Zones 7-9.

### Rosa Mundi

*Rosa gallica versicolor* This popular spring-flowering variety is a sport of the Apothecary Rose with fragrant blossoms striped light crimson and pale pink. It was included in Jefferson's 1791 order from Prince Nursery. Grows to four feet and spreads by root suckers. Zones 5-9.



*Musk Rose*

### 'Shailer's Provence' Rose *NEW*

*Rosa centifolia* cv. The centuries old Provence roses, cultivated in Europe by 1600, are traditionally known as "Cabbage Roses" because of the multitude of petals per blossom. They are a complex amalgam of various ancient roses including Gallica, Musk, and Dog Rose. 'Shailer's Provence', introduced in the 1790s, is smothered with fragrant blossoms for several weeks in late spring and early summer. It grows in a four-foot mounded shrub and its arching stems, heavy with flowers, often drape to the ground. Jefferson's 1791 order from Prince included the "Large Provence" rose. Zones 4-9.

Make your order on the Web at:  
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Once this rose traveled abroad, its future development was dramatic and swift, resulting in a breed of roses that would grace the gardens of the Empress Josephine and all of Europe. But, the Prince Nurseries collected and propagated Noisettes as well and by the time William Robert, the family's fourth generation, was operating the business, Prince Nurseries was offering over 50 Noisettes of American origin along with dozens of other roses of all classes. By

1828, Prince claimed to offer 600 kinds of roses.

William Robert Prince, the last in the family line to operate the nursery, made the business's greatest strides toward promoting and popularizing roses in America. In 1846, four years after his father's death, William Robert published his long postponed manuscript *Prince's Manual of Roses*. According to Léonie Bell in her 1979 forward to



Thomas Rivers' the *Rose Amateur's Guide*, a book that inspired Prince's work considerably, the extent of rose literature available to gardeners by 1830 consisted of four very costly and difficult to obtain works. Among these were Pierre-Joseph Redouté's *Les Roses* and John Lindley's *Rosarum Monographia*. Therefore, *Prince's Manual* joined but a handful of books devoted to roses that American gardeners could readily purchase. Two years earlier, however, a young and gregarious Scottish nurseryman from Philadelphia, Robert Buist, published *The Rose Manual*, which eclipsed Prince's treatise, becoming an instant best seller and the definitive reference on the topic.

While Buist's book was the more successful, Prince could still lay claim to having the largest collection of roses in America and perhaps the entire world. Prince's small manual concluded with his catalog of over 1,600 varieties, the sum total of roses amassed by both William Robert and his late father. The 1840s were considered the watershed decade in the evolution of roses. Prince noted that there was a "total change in public taste" as a tidal wave of roses capable of successive bloom arrived on the scene, some for only a short period of time as newer varieties replaced them.

Native North American species, which Jefferson recommended to his friend Madame de Tessé in Paris forty years earlier, were not forgotten by Prince even

though they never caught on in Europe. He paid special attention to hybrids of the prairie rose, *Rosa setigera*, the most celebrated being the magnificent 'Baltimore Belle'. Prince also studied the famous Cherokee rose, *Rosa leavigata*, a species Jefferson received in 1804 from John Milledge, a Revolutionary patriot and Governor of Georgia, and which he planted in his nurs-

ery at Monticello. Prince was one of the first to recognize that this vigorous rose, which had naturalized so extensively throughout the South it was thought to be native, was in fact an Asian species.

Within the span of a few decades the rose moved from a minor role to center stage, captivating the hearts and imagination of American gardeners. A multitude of books, pamphlets, catalogs,

reference manuals, and even novels on the topic would follow, feeding the public's insatiable appetite for the rose. Likewise, as rose breeding became increasingly sophisticated, specialty nurseries improved and increased the selection of varieties considerably. Within a mile of the Prince Nursery operation, Samuel Bowne Parsons opened his own nursery specializing in roses and camellias. Although inevitably competitive businesses flourished with greater success, the historical legacy of America's premier nursery remains firm when Prince reigned supreme.

Peggy Cornett, Director  
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*Great Maiden's Blush*

# Thomas Jefferson's Rose Order

In 1791, Jefferson placed an order for ten roses from the William Prince Nursery. His list was taken directly from the Prince catalog, using the common names that are used below. While most are fairly straightforward, opinions may vary as to the correct identity of some of these varieties. For the most part, these roses were the traditional, spring-blooming varieties that were well known in European and American gardens.



## Moss Provence

*Rosa centifolia muscosa* The species name "centifolia," or hundred-leaved, refers to this rose's multitude of petals, which are so thickly produced that sometimes the petals turn inward producing a quartering effect to the blossoms. Another popular term for this flower is the cabbage rose. The moss form is a mutation of the cabbage or large provence rose with soft, pine-scent prickles on the buds before the blossoms open. In 1805, President Jefferson also received a "Provence Moss Rose" from Washington nurseryman Thomas Main, which was planted at Monticello in "the angles of the house."



## Yellow Rose

*Rosa lutea* (formerly *R. foetida*) This golden-yellow, single-flowered rose is native to southwestern and west central China where it was in cultivation by the 16th century. It has chestnut-brown stems, an erect habit, and bears showy, round bright red rose hips. This species is largely responsible for bringing the yellow color to modern roses as well as the undesirable black spot disease.

## Rosa Mundi

*Rosa gallica versicolor* Probably the oldest and best known sport of the apothecary rose with a mixture of white and light crimson striping of the petals. It has been so called since the mid 1600s and legend has it that it was named for Fair Rosamund, mistress of Henry II.

## Large Provence Rose

*Rosa centifolia* 'Major' A fully double, cabbage rose with deep pink petals and a distinct button eye in the center. This large shrub rose was being grown by the late 1700s.

## Monthly Rose

Possibly describes a form of Damask rose, *Rosa damascena bifera*, an ancient hybrid

thought to be a cross between a gallica and a musk rose with highly fragrant, silky pink to white, loosely semi-double blossoms and tapered hips. The shrub's tendency to re-bloom sporadically after the initial spring period gives it the name 'Royal Four Season' or 'Quatre Saison' and suggests the name "monthly" used by Prince. William Prince's 1799 and Benjamin Prince's circa 1822 catalogs also list two separate varieties of "monthly" roses: the "Red Monthly," which might mean a type of China rose such as 'Old Blush', and "White Monthly Cluster, or Musk Rose," which definitely indicates the musk rose or *Rosa moschata* (see below).

### White Rose

A *Rosa alba* variety, which is an ancient European rose with tall, arching stems,



handsome grayish or bluish-green foliage, and semi-double or fully double white blossoms.

### Primrose

Most likely a variety of *Rosa spinosissima*, or Scotch briar rose, with striped petals, in reference to "prim," a term for marbled. In 1799 William Prince offered this same rose as "Prim, or Marbled Rose." Bernard McMahon, in 1806, also uses the term "Marble Rose" for another type of apothecary rose and for a form of eglantine or sweetbriar rose, *Rosa eglanteria*.

### Musk Rose

*Rosa moschata plena* A robust, late blooming rose (autumn in Britain) introduced during the reign of Henry VIII and nearly lost to cultivation in the mid 20th century. The white blossoms are produced in large clusters and the tips of the gray-green leaflets are distinctly tapered. It also was called the "monthly cluster" or "musk cluster."

### Cinnamon Rose

*Rosa cinnamomoea* Jefferson also called this early flowering species the "May Rose." It bears fragrant, pale pink, single or semi-double blossoms and the shrub is distinguished by its cinnamon red,



upright stems. The cinnamon rose originated in China and was being cultivated in Europe before the 17th century.

### Thornless Rose

There are numerous possibilities for a thornless rose, including the alpine rose, *Rosa pendulina*, which is a European species dating to the early 18th century. It bears single, deep pink flowers early in the season, followed by showy, orange-red hips.