

# Gool Āb

By Sam Kerr

A member of the botanical Family Rosaceae and the Genus Rosa, it has been identified as a wild flower even in fossil form. **The original ‘true’ Rose looks quite different from the multi-layered cultivated Rose we are so used to admiring in modern times.** The bulky ovary, the “rose hip” has on its rim **five sepals, which alternate with five petals.** This arrangement of a single row of petals remains a common arrangement to all the flowers of this family and genus. In its early young stage the single layer of delicate petals are well laid out in a circular row but in a fully mature Rose the petals become thick and broadened, thus overlapping each other (see Visual Essay ‘The legendary Rose of Iran’ for the photo). In many varieties of ‘cultivated’ roses the stamens in the middle of the flower become petal-like, too, creating multiple layers, which we happen to admire.

## Our ancient Airyanic roots:

The rose plant in Indo-European languages has its origin in the Avestan word '**Varedha**' - a sweet smelling fragrant flower plant. In Modern Persian the Rose is '**Vard**' [Arabic '**Vard Juri**' - 'Jur', Sassanian Firuzabad was famous for its lingering aroma of rose scent in the air]. In Sappho's Aeolic Greek dialect the word became '**Wrodon**', in Etruscan Greek '**Rhodian**' (from the island of **Rhodes**). Thence, Latin and Old Normandy derivative '**Rosa**' flowed into the much later English word, **Rose**. A fragrant flower being '**Gool**' in Persian, the courtesy was also extended to the rose. '**Goolistan**', then, became a 'Rose Garden'. Rose cultivators throughout the world have tried to create roses which have the long flowering qualities of modern roses with the fragrance of the 'old Asiatic roses' of the past. Modern roses have been cultivated in England and France and most of Europe only as late as the 19th century. Bred primarily for appearance, they have almost no fragrance. Now, there are more than 30,000 varieties of the Genus '**Rosa**' with a highly 'involved' family tree of sub-genuses and hybrids.

For over 5,000 years **Persia** (*Rosa persica*) and **China** (*Rosa chinensis*) had remained the documented habitat of the **naturally fragrant varieties freely recurrent in bloom** (throughout the year) and the **only ones that bore yellow flowers**. The first documented reference to the aesthetics of **Asiatic roses** is by the Indo-Aryan Sumerians circa 4000 BCE. Later, clay tablets record Sargon I of

Akkad (2684-2630 BCE) as having '**brought vines, figs & rose trees from beyond the River Tigris**' - Iran and further East. Thence, they were carried to Egypt, Greece, Rome and further west. It was as late as the medieval times the Crusaders took the choicest varieties to the west. The Asiatic **Queen of Flowers**, the Rose has been glorified in art, architecture and verse for ages. Initially, the **King of flowers** in Greece '**basileus ton antheon**' it became the 'Queen of flowers' as late as 600 BCE in Sappho's 'Ode to the Rose'.

The elegant single layered Iranian Rose growing in the fabulous Rose fields of Qasmar, near Kashan, possesses such a heavenly perfume it is nurtured and grown entirely for its exquisite nectar. **Such was the legendary resplendence of the fragrance of the Rose water - Gool Ab, that the nectar (the Rose Water) itself, by its very name, became known as the Rose.** Indeed, the time-honoured extraction from the blossoms in these Rose fields in mid-Spring is witnessed by thousands of nature lovers and tourists, who delight in the untouched nature of the rose scented environment of these much-frequented fields. Even the harvesting and transport of the flowers is a delicate process done before sunrise to obtain the most heavenly aroma in the maximum quantity. The photo (see it in the Visual Essay 'The legendary Rose of Iran') shows all three colours in the same rose - deep red, bright pink and pure white. Commonly found in the fields are also Roses grown exclusively red (gool-e-sorkh), pink (gool-e-surati) or white (gool-e-sefid). Iran prides itself on producing the most exquisite quality rose water. It exports 40,000 tons of rose water every year. Currently, some 10,000 tons of rose water in differing qualities (depending on the vintage and precise time of collection and even minor variations in the time-honoured traditional way of extraction), 3,000 tons of red rose, and 1,500 tons of various plants and medicinal waters produced in Kashan, are exported annually.

### The legendary rose of Iran:

The elegant '**Gool-e-sorkh/Gool-e-surati**' had been nominated a '**National Treasure**' of Persia ages before any nation deemed any other variety of rose to be a national emblem. Its velvet-textured red to reddish-pink to white undulating petals signifying deep admiration, amorous joy, bashfulness, embarrassment ....has remained **the very symbol of life itself**. Its allure represents the passion of living and the thorns, the difficulties one endures to reach that state. Such aesthetic tastes glorified in poetic couplets were posted on the Palace Gates of **Khusru the Great 531-579 CE** when Europe was still subservient to Roman occupation. Such was the

legendary resplendence of the fragrance of the **Rose Water -'Gool āb', that the nectar (the rose water) itself, by its very name, became known as the Rose.**

The velvety texture of the undulating petals in shades of white to pink to red is likened to a rosy cheeked blushing complexion of a beautiful Iranian lady. Many a bard has likened the blooms to signify deep admiration, amorous joy, bashfulness, embarrassment... , indeed, the very symbol of life. Its allure represents the passion of living and the thorns, the difficulties one has to endure to reach that state. Such aesthetic tastes glorified in poetic couplets were posted on the palace gates of the Sassanian Emperor, Khusru the Great (531-579 BCE) at a time when Europe was still subservient to the Roman occupation. English history as taught in Schools and universities had not yet 'begun' and the Renaissance in Europe was still to occur 1,000 years later.

A Sassanian portrait would be deemed inadequate without a rose held delicately between index finger and thumb. Of significance, too, is a lone single layered rosette carved in the gable end of the entrance, the only decoration on the tomb of Cyrus the Great (599-529 BCE) shown in a sketch executed by the visiting envoys of Queen Christina of Sweden in 1638. Now, only the lower end of the rosette remains as the trace. The Iranian tradition of Rose water mixed with saffron as ink is still commonly used for writing charms and romantic verse.

[‘...the twist, the turn of thy hair - tell me, what be the reason?

thy inebriated eyes’ distant stare - tell me, what be the  
reason?

.....though rose petals have not been scattered.....

....., thy rose scented aura - tell me, what be the reason?’  
- Jalal ud din Rumi]

### **Our Avestan emphasis on fragrance:**

Deeply rooted in age-old tradition Iranian perfumes, oils and creams in medication and essence in food were extracts of fragrant roses long before this was ever done outside Asia. ‘**Scattering of Rose petals**’ and ‘**sprinkling of Rose water**’ signs of goodwill and welcome, have, to this day, remained typically Iranian. Stone reliefs of Darius I (521-486 BCE) show him seated with scent bottles and incense cones with Xerxes (486-465 BCE) behind him holding flowers. Such is the emphasis on **sweet scented-ness being perceived synonymous with virtue** that a newly-wedded Zarathushti couple is showered with a basketful of rose-petals with

the incantation -‘**may you remain ever so virtuous in your togetherness**’. Zarathushti homes are traditionally refreshed in every sense at sunrise with garlands of roses and flowers and at sunset with fuming sandalwood, frankincense and myrrh.

**Ashi(sh)-svang Yasht XVII.6: Perfumed sweet scented-ness pervades the house, where kinship of**

**long duration has endured and where courage, purity and righteousness has been established.**

.....carried through from Peshdadian and Keyanian times.

**Hadokht Nask XXII.7: At the end of the third night when dawn breaks the soul of the**

**righteous is sustained by fragrance released to the winds from plants bearing perfume.**

A sweet-scented Avestan person is deemed to ‘**possess integrity, credibility, righteousness and an aura of impeccable conscience.**’ On Chinvat Bridge the soul’s conscience appearing as a maiden says: -

**Hadokht Nask XXII.11: “.....thou art good, of lofty character, fair in dealings, sweet scented,**

**of fearless strength and free from spite.....such as I, thy own Conscience, appear to thee.”**

The inimitable Iranian pleasure of the spirit and the delight of the senses has prompted many a poet in his lament the fading away of the rose as it withered with time to the absence of the nightingale’s breathless rapture.

[‘The red roses have blossomed; the nightingale’s gone into  
a  
stupor. Everywhere.....the hue and cry of ecstasy’ - Hafiz]

[‘When the rose is faded and its garden gone  
thou wilt no longer hear the nightingale sing  
.....the suitor has left a bird without care...’ - Jalal ud din  
Rumi]

[....‘alas, that Spring too should vanish with the Rose  
That youth’s sweet-scented manuscript should close!’ -  
Khayyam]

It was as if everything one hoped would remain enduring had to end in its own perfect time. The timing of the fading away of the Rose seemed to be the perfectest - a distinct privilege, clearly

denied to the thorns, which had no chance to fade. Indeed, they became more menacing as they dried.

### **Its chemistry:**

So delicately poised is the chemistry that the emanations respond significantly to the surroundings. Since they ***diminish in sunlight*** the picking needs to be completed before sunrise to obtain the choicest fragrance. Even ***human presence and movement and colorful clothing*** - merely walking past the blossoms will create a profound effect upon their emanations.

[When asked "What gift hast thou brought us from the Goolistan?" the poet replies

**'I intended to fill the folds of my robe with roses as presents for my friends. But when I approached the rose bush the exhilarating fragrance of the roses hastily transcended my desire to pluck. I could not but let go the hold of my robe - Sa'adi ]**

*The consonance of appreciable temple **harmonies of voice and music**, too, are known to promote the finest flowers in India.*

### **Its late appreciation in Europe:**

Not much was known about the red rose prior to Europeans until the 7th century. Ancient Persian legends maintain that the rose's red coloration came about because a nightingale enamored by the white rose, grasped it so tightly that the thorns pierced its breast and its blood turned the white rose, red. It is not surprising, ***travelers from across the sea, enchanted by its beauty and perfume called it 'The Red Damask'*** (*Rosa damascena* – after it was carried to Europe during the Crusades in the 13th Century. It is also known as the 'Apothecary's Rose' since it was cultivated for its medicinal values. It is sometimes referred to as the 'Old Red Damask' since it originated from the 'olde world' damask rose.

---

**The early Greeks and Romans** had associated roses with **pain, suffering and death**. They decorated their tombs to appease the spirits of the dead and carved them on ceilings to signify all conversation be held secret (***sub-rosa***). They used a **Rosary** of rolled petals in cult practices. For their orgies the Romans forced the oppressed peasants to grow roses instead of food crops. After the departure of the Romans in the early part of **English history (post-**

871 CE) the rose was strongly disapproved because of its connection with the decadence of the Roman Empire. During Tudor times the rose was placed over the confessional. The Jacobites adopted a white rose as their emblem to help the Pretender to the throne 'in secret'. It was not until the time of **Edward I (1272-1307)** when a golden heraldic rose was used that it entered English heraldry. **Edward IV** used a white Rose in the centre of a golden-rayed sun and **Elizabeth I** a Tudor Rose as her motto. Slowly, the Church changed them into Christian symbols of the Virgin Mary - *Rosa mystica* and *Rosa sine spina (rose without thorns)*. Since the introduction of the rose in Royal heraldry, as late as the medieval times, it has become a **national flower in England**. A rose is depicted on many Canadian symbols a symbol of several former British colonies. Even then it took several centuries before the rose was generally accepted by commoners as a flower of intrinsic beauty useful for aesthetic, culinary and medicinal purposes, too. The first publication occurred as late as 1597. Even until the 18<sup>th</sup> century roses in England were only summer flowering. There was, clearly, a need for the major **Asiatic varieties like Rosa damascanae, persica and chinensis** to be brought in since Asia, being the native habitat of the domesticated rose, many varieties were freely recurrent in bloom throughout the year and had a wider range of color and, of course, fragrance. From deep red '**Gool-e-sorkh**', to pinkish-red '**Gool-e-surati**', to pure white '**Gul-e-sefid**' it was really the yellow rose '**Gool-e-saarg**', which signified the highest symbolism in western culture. The aesthetic, culinary and medicinal values came much later.

---

#### **National flower of the nations:**

In modern times, the rose has become the '**national flower**' also of Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, England, Iraq and the Maldives and the '**official flower**' of the States of New York, Iowa and North Dakota, the *Cherokee Rose* in Georgia, the Province of Alberta, Canada and the prefectures of Hokkaido and Ibaraki, Japan. A Rose Garden was first established in the White House grounds in 1913 and June was nominated '**National Rose month**' in 1969. It became '**National Floral emblem**' of the USA in 1986 when President Reagan signed Proclamation 5574.

#### **References:**

Khordeh Avesta translations of Kavasji Edulji Kanga and

Tehmurasp Rustomji Sethna

***Sam Kerr (Sydney, Australia)***