

A rose is a rose is a rose - or is it?

Are our judgements clouded by what we are told is beautiful – even if it's not?

Asks Anne Wareham

The other day someone put up a picture on Twitter, claiming that 'the rose garden looks great now!' Illustrating this dubious assertion was the usual sight of ugly flower blobs on spikey sticks, immodestly showing their legs and displaying their discordant array of harsh colours. A common enough sight, and one greeted with applause almost everywhere. It seems that as long as something has a flower, and does not suffer the controversial label 'weed' it just must be 'lovely'.

Everything to do with gardens except for slugs is lovely. This absurdity doesn't confine itself to horticultural enthusiasts. One of the shocks you will experience if you ever appear at the Hay Festival is the ghastly rose you will be presented with when you finish your talk. It will have a rigid stem a mile long with an artificial looking scentless rose in a lurid colour perched at the end. The wise chuck it exuberantly into the crowd in an extravagant and apparently generous gesture which actually spares them subsequently carrying the horrible thing around.

The Hay roses have no scent. You might think that would put people off, but one of the most popular and celebrated roses ever raised has practically no scent. 'Peace', described by the experienced rose grower Peter Beales as, "without doubt, the finest Hybrid Tea ever

raised", has sold over 100 million plants and most people cannot find any fragrance in it at all. It produces those typical Hybrid Tea stiff petals which for some reason, probably association, always depress me. For some reason the ideal rose of this kind tends to be far too large – hence the blobby look – and they consequently both frequently weigh the plant down and go over very badly. There is often much discussion of which Camellias shed their

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flowers cleanly (none, actually) but the same problem with roses is rarely acknowledged.

So, full of enthusiasm for these monstrosities people gather them together in a rose garden, which at least offers the possibility of avoiding them altogether. These gardens also frequently feature bare soil, the better to do the feeding, hoeing, fungiciding and the rest that these miserable, often disease prone plants demand.

A healthy, unblemished rose leaf is a rare sight, so the ugly stalks are

inescapable; unless a few miserable perennials skulk underneath along with a stray weed or two.

Then the collection mania emerges. One colour of rose, indeed one variety of rose, would at least offer the possibility of some harmony and even drama. But more is better; is it not? Why just have crimson if you can add orange and pink to the cacophony? You can have fantasies that you are adventurous with colour like Christopher Lloyd...

It is possible to have a beautiful rose and a beautiful rose garden. Mottisfont demonstrates that, thanks to the rediscovery of the old roses and the design work of the late Graham Stuart Thomas. But most of the rest of the world sails on, oblivious.

All this demonstrates the sad inability of both gardeners and the public to look critically at anything described as 'flower' or 'garden'. A collective blindness descends and a sentimental sigh clouds the view. We are often and ridiculously described as a nation of garden lovers, whereas in reality we are totally tolerant of any ugly sight which is put in front of us, as long as it incorporates something we are told is a beautiful flower.

ABOUT ANNE WAREHAM



Anne Wareham's book, *The Bad Tempered Gardener* is the story of the creation with her husband, Charles Hawes, of their garden in the Welsh borders, the Veddw. Anne also writes for the *Telegraph*, garden magazines and her own blog on the Veddw website, www.veddw.com. She is editor of www.thinkinggardens.co.uk.

