



The Rose Brigade planted 70 rose bushes in the Santa Rosa Rural Cemetery, including the "Sovenir de la Malmaison, 1843," in the foreground. (JOHN BURGESS / *The Press Democrat*)

## **The rose brigade: Rose enthusiasts give rescued vintage roses a new home in the historic Santa Rosa Rural Cemetery**

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Under warm and sunny mid-November skies, Karen Poulsen, Susan Louise, Niles Cochet, and 19 other transients found new, permanent homes after moving here as long as a century ago.

Unfamiliar to most, these were once household names in Sonoma County; all are vintage roses that once lived outside bungalows and graced cottage gardens gone now from Santa Rosa streets.

Along with dozens of other antique roses from up and down the coast, these were rescued, propagated from cuttings, and now, thanks to Sebastopol rosarian Gregg Lowery and a small but dedicated group of volunteers that call themselves the Rose Brigade, they've been returned to local growing grounds, this time as a Memorial Grove in the Santa Rosa Rural Cemetery.

The cemetery is something of an enigma, considered by many as only a burial tract where pioneers and early residents were laid to rest.

But the grounds are more than that. They preserve horticultural history as well, and they are about to become a spectacular repository of old roses, something that Santa Rosa — the City of Roses — and all of Sonoma County can take pride in.

The cemetery's semi-wooded 17 acres became official in 1867 as a sun-filled, park-like refuge overlooking early Santa Rosa. Its founding was part of a national movement that began in

Massachusetts in the 1830s when municipalities set aside public ground for burial in lieu of shrinking churchyards.

Because there were no public parks at the time, the concept of a garden cemetery — formally called a Rural Cemetery simply because it did not lie within the heart of a city — was embraced and the site became a destination for families on weekends when they cared for plants at gravesites.

As Lowery explains, “In populations all over the United States, loved ones were memorialized with roses as people created a sort of paradise on Earth. There were drives for carriages and a view from the hilltop. Families would come once a week to visit and would water their roses, living memories of a life. Roots grew deep and after 2 years, watering tapered off and roses became drought-tolerant and many went on untended for a hundred years or more.”

Each rose planted there has a story of its own, but as a group the new Memorial collection is writing history as it decorates the meadow along Franklin Avenue and preserves 70 antique roses brought to the North Coast long ago.

### **Dedicated rosarians**

The Rural Cemetery Preservation Committee and a cadre of other volunteers are faithfully renovating the Santa Rosa grounds, which suffered from years of neglect. Thanks largely to Lowery's donations from his own collection and from his Vintage Gardens enterprise, volunteers have replaced many of the original roses.

But the heart of the rose-planting project lies with an enthusiastic rosarian and key committee member, Sandy Frary. Two years ago, Frary thought their restoration of vintage roses was complete, but a surprising discovery last year jump-started the project anew.

Maps dating from 1879 found in city storage revealed plots in a sprawling meadow area and in several other locations where no grave markers existed. In November 2009, dogs brought in from the Institute of Canine Forensics detected human remains in three of these areas.

Frary proposed that the Preservation Committee plant a Memorial Rose Grove in the meadow in memory of the unknowns buried there, and also in memory of victims of the 1906 earthquake interred in a mass grave at the foot of the meadow and throughout the cemetery.

Once again, she called upon Lowery for help, this time to draw up plans for the grove and boost the rose population in the cemetery even more.

For the Memorial Grove, Lowery laid out an oval design for the 70 new plantings of antique roses with walking paths for close-up viewing on a site stretching along Franklin Avenue.

### **A mélange of roses**

Nearly 300 roses of all types are now planted throughout the cemetery — Bourbons, Noisettes, Shrub Roses, Portlands, Floribundas, Hybrid Teas, and many more. Some are considered Old Roses — those introduced prior to 1867 — while others hybridized more than 75 years ago are called antiques.

“What makes these cemetery roses so special,” says Frary, “is not only their history and beauty, but also the fact that many are drought tolerant — they receive no above-ground water during the hot Santa Rosa summers, and have not for decades!” Her goal is to have the newly planted roses eventually become drought-tolerant as well.

Among the most treasured are the large-flowered climbers and ramblers, some of which are original to the cemetery, others donated by Lowery. They range from the demure crimson Souvenir de J. Mermet to much larger varieties such as Cooper's Burmese, a gigantic and fast-growing tree climber, highly fragrant with vicious thorniness and a delicate off-white flower.

“Many people shy away from the larger ramblers because they don't have room or don't want to battle their rampant growth,” Frary explains. “But here in the spaciousness of the 17-acre cemetery, we welcome them and intend to let them reach their genetically-patterned size and habit and reward the public with their magnificent show of power and grace.”

### **Vital helping hands**

Since 1994, when the city initiated the Rural Cemetery Preservation Committee, groups of volunteers have pooled their efforts to replace roses that had disappeared from gravesites and the surrounding landscape and to restore order to the grounds. Santa Rosa Recreation & Parks supplies equipment, but the real work is done by volunteers like John Dennison, who takes the lead in bi-weekly maintenance.

“They call themselves The Tombstone Trio,” says Dennison's wife, Kathy, “and do weed-whacking every Tuesday and Thursday.”

Dennison, a volunteer from the beginning, relies on Scott Minnis and Andy Baldwin for regular weed control and clean-up, but they welcome the public every third Saturday to join a work party or assist Becky Montgomery, who organizes the native plant garden there.

Nearly two dozen Rose Brigade volunteers came out earlier this month to install the new Memorial Grove, but it took considerable preparation beforehand by the Preservation Committee. Frary and fellow rosarian Judy Enochs planned the project for months, and Jim Frary and John Dennison prepped 70 holes for the planting brigade.

### **Visitors welcome**

As in the 19th century, visitors are welcome to the Rural Cemetery to enjoy the roses, stroll through the extensive grounds and find relaxation in the garden setting.

Hikers and dog walkers have already discovered how enjoyable it is to follow paths winding from Franklin Street across the face of the slope to the top of the knoll.

And third Saturday work parties share a camaraderie as they preserve a facet of local history.

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