

Roy Graff knows his roses

People come from miles around to see his award-winning flowers

by Gary Luhr

When Roy Graff goes outside to water the roses, he's liable to be gone several hours. It's not just because he also takes time to prune, weed, spray and perform any other chores his flowers may require; it's because he has not a dozen, or even a hundred, but more than 700 of this most popular plant.

"I have about 10 roses for every year of my age," he laughed, "and I'm going to add 10 a year until I have 1,000."

Graff, who will be 76 this summer, has spent a good many hours "watering the roses" since he retired in 1973 from the U.S. Soil Conservation Service. His home along KY Route 4, near Morganfield, has become a mecca for garden clubs and rose-lovers throughout western Kentucky and beyond.

"I read all the time and talk to people about them," he said. "The rose time of year is 365 days."

With his wife Florence, a retired school teacher, Graff has displayed his roses in shows around the country.

"I do the outside work; she prepares them for the shows," he said.

A living room filled with ribbons and trophies confirms their success. They won their first blue ribbon at a local show in Evansville, Indiana

around 1959. After competing successfully at a number of district shows over the next several years, they attended their first national show in 1964 at Peoria, Illinois.

"I went hoping to win one blue ribbon," Graff recalled. He came home instead with a silver tray for the best "old garden" rose in the show—a John Hooper.

Outstanding judge

About the time he started showing his own varieties, Graff began judging other people's roses. To become a certified show judge, "you have to go to school and pass an exam that's pretty tough," he said. Today, he judges 8 to 12 shows a year.

"To get a high mark a rose needs to have good form, a good high-pointed center, uniformity of color, a good stem and foliage and nice proportion," he said.

Last year, Graff was named "outstanding judge" of the Kentucky-Arkansas-Tennessee District of the American Rose Society. He is a former district editor for the Society's national magazine and, for the past six years, has written a weekly column for his local newspaper, the *Union County Advocate*.

Headquartered in Shreveport,



Graff places a paper cover over one of his roses. The "hats" keep the blooms from fading so fast in the hot summer sun.



(left) Graff and some of his 700 roses. (above) Paper "hats" help keep flowers looking their best for competition.

Louisiana, the American Rose Society is the largest single-plant society in the country, having around 17,000 members, Graff said. He joined shortly after he began growing roses in Madisonville in 1949.

"I was always interested in growing things, and I was living next to a greenhouse at the time," he said. The Graffs moved to their present home in 1957.

This spring, a nursery in Dallas introduced a rose that Graff created, an Orange Starina. While such a creation requires much patience and many hours' work, raising roses does not, he insists.

Roses are fun

"The first thing I tell people is that roses are not hard to grow, they're fun to grow," Graff said. "You have to do two or three things, though, and you'd better do them right."

The first is to plant them where they will get at least six hours of sun each day — "preferably morning sun, but that is not necessary," he said.

"Get good, number-one plants from a reliable nursery. A lot of the roses sold at garden centers and cut-rate stores are number-two plants. A number-one plant will have three or four healthy stems and a good root

system."

Most of the roses grown commercially come from Texas or California, Graff said.

"Work up the bed pretty good and put in some organic matter — well-rotted manure is good," he said. "If the soil is clay, put in a little sand to improve drainage."

Feeding and watering is important, once the roses begin to grow.

"Any good farm fertilizer is good for roses," he said. He prefers one that releases its nutrients slowly, however.

"Roses need an inch of water per week. If Mother Nature doesn't do it, you have to." Though some people disagree, Graff said he believes in washing the foliage when he waters his plants as well as the ground around them. To help the earth retain its moisture and also to control weeds, he uses a two-inch mulch of grass clippings throughout the rose beds.

Graff advised spraying the plants every 10 days to two weeks for black spot and mildew; but he cautioned against spraying when the weather is hot and dry. He said he uses an insecticide only when he sees evidence of damage from bugs.

Finally, blooms need to be cut before they go to seed. "The sooner you get them off, the sooner you'll get

new ones," he said.

After the first hard freeze each fall, he cuts his roses back to within 8 to 10 inches of the ground and covers them for the winter.

"In this country, the hybrid tea is the most popular rose. In England, it's the florabunda," he said.

"Hybrid teas have larger blooms as a rule and produce more single blooms. Grandifloras usually have smaller blooms than the hybrid teas and more clusters of blooms. Florabundas usually are low-growing and have lots of clusters."

Miniature roses are also becoming increasingly popular, he said. "They have everything the larger varieties have except the size."

Graff said England has a better climate for growing roses than most parts of the United States. There the temperature ranges from the 50s at night to the high 70s during the day. "Every yard in London has roses and everyone has a Queen Elizabeth (variety)," he said. "The Queen Mother is also a great rose admirer," he added.

"It's estimated that 50 million people raise roses in this country — one family in four," he said, "yet very few get the maximum return for their efforts."