

Herb's Gift: A Rose Named Irene



Newsday Photos / Bill Davis

A red single floribunda rose with a white eye was hybridized by Herb Zipper of Baldwin to honor Irene Virag.

HERB ZIPPER gave me a rose. He *really* gave me a rose. He named it after me.

It's not that my name has never been connected with flowers. And not just because I'm lucky enough to be able to write about gardens for a living. My family's roots go back to Hungary, and Virag is the Hungarian word for flower. I saw my name blooming all over Budapest when I visited there several years ago.

But what Herb Zipper did is much bigger. Rose is a rose is a single-flowered floribunda called Irene Virag, and I admit that by any other name it wouldn't smell as sweet. I'm speaking figuratively, of course — it's not a fragrant rose but I still think it's very lovely.

Irene Virag is registered with the American Rose Society. How could I not be flattered? That puts me up there with classy women like Ingrid Bergman, Catherine Deneuve, Audrey Hepburn, Maria Callas, Judy Garland, Dolly Parton, Ginger Rogers, Lucille Ball and Elizabeth Taylor. Not to mention Queen Elizabeth, Agatha Christie, Elizabeth Arden, Cleopatra, Empress Josephine and Betsy Ross.

Besides it's No. 882 in Herb's own hand-written annals of crosses he's made and how the seedlings have performed. That alone would be sufficient. Herb is not only a nice man with impeccable judgment when it comes to naming roses, but he's a fancier who has hybridized 1,644 roses in the past nine years. He's done all this at his home in Baldwin, where he and his wife, Phyllis, plant, prune, preen and nurture 250 bushes on their tidy property. They even play opera outside on the radio to give their roses a congenial environment.

And the story goes even further. As you might expect when it comes to roses, there's a matter of sentiment involved. Herb and I share a bittersweet bond. We've both had to deal with a wild seed that grows in shadows and threatens the gardens of all our lives. I'm a breast cancer survivor. Herb's fighting prostate cancer.

Herb describes himself as a faithful reader of my scribbles about life in the good earth and says that he was moved when I wrote about my own battle with the wild seed. "It just came to me that I should name a rose for you," he told me.

The idea flowered in the spring of 1998 when I received a letter from Herb in which he introduced himself as a consulting rosarian and judge for the American Rose Society and a past president of the Long Island Rose Society. He said simply that, "I have several seedlings, which I plan to register with ARS, and with your permission, it would give me great pleasure

sure to name one with the commercial or exhibition name of Irene Virag."

He gave me two choices. One was 882; the other was 657 — a coral-colored miniature rose. He said to plant them, see how they took to my garden and decide which I liked better. "When I originally thought of naming a rose for you," he told me the other day when I visited his garden, "I had 657 in mind. But I could tell from your writing that you liked things with a wilder, more natural look. So at the last minute I decided to bring 882 along."

Herb had me pegged. I preferred the red single with its white eye because of its delicate simplicity and because it looked a little like a wild rose. I thought of it having my name, and I was touched.

It's not on the market yet and since most major rose growers do their own hybridizing, there's only a slight chance that it ever will be. But it's one of only 20 roses Herb felt were good enough to register with the American Rose Society. And it exists in my yard and Herb's, and it will be listed in a future ARS publication called "Modern Roses 11." That's more than enough for me.

My Irene Virag showed only one bloom this month but it's still a growing plant, and it flowered nicely this past spring. My husband loves to show it to visitors and tell them that it's named for me, and I get a kick out of it when

he does. And I'm happy that an Irene Virag is doing very well in Herb's yard, too.

A hummingbird was flitting near my namesake the day I visited Herb and Phyllis. Like all their roses, it grows in a raised bed and looks very healthy. There were several faded blooms but more buds were on the way. Another, larger Irene Virag was in a container waiting for a spot in the garden. As I admired it, Herb, a 65-year-old semiretired chemist, told me about its background and explained how he hybridized it.

Herb's first step in making a cross occurs in June when he pulls off the petals of one rose. He removes the stamen along with its capsule of pollen and puts it in a clear film canister. The open container is placed in a coffee can with a drying agent. When the stamen dries, a yellow-orange powder appears.

Next, Herb removes the petals and stamen from a second rose. This is called — I'm just trying to be botanically correct here — emasculation. With his pinky he puts the powdery pollen on the stigma, or top part of the plant's pistil. A glassine envelope with air holes is placed over the pistil to protect it from insects, and the plant is labeled.

If the cross takes, the plant forms a hip, which Herb splits open 120 days later to find the seeds waiting. He places them in a container with water and a drop of fungicide. The ones that sink are good. Herb rolls them up in a moist paper towel that's refrigerated in a sealed Ziploc bag for 60 days.

Around Christmas, the seeds are planted in a soil-less mix in half-inch-by-half-inch pots covered with milled sphagnum moss that go under a mister in the greenhouse. They germinate four to six months later. The seedlings stay in the greenhouse, moving to larger and larger pots as they grow.

By September, if Herb feels good about them, they're ready for the garden. He'll observe his babies for two years, checking out their blooms and their hardiness through the winter. The ones he thinks are good enough to register earn names.

When my rose is old enough, I'll be able to tell it about its parentage. Irene Virag was created in the summer of 1992 when Herb crossed an orange-yellow single floribunda named Playboy with a red-and-white unnamed mini that a fellow rosarian who'd moved to San Diego had hybridized and sent to him. The cross germinated in the winter of 1993. "By 1996, I knew I had something I liked," Herb told me. "The bush grew big and healthy, and the flowers were bright and pretty. It became a keeper."

That's me — big and healthy, although I don't know about bright and pretty.

Herb and I talked more about roses than cancer. He's had several operations since his diagnosis, and he's recovering from his latest surgery right now. I wish I had a rose I could name for him. The best I could do was write this column and say thank you. ●



Irene Virag



Herb Zipper, above, first considered naming a miniature rose after Irene Virag, but figured she'd prefer a wilder one.