



**Highly fragrant:** the product of Ron Cattermole's crossing of Royden with Corso. Photo: Mary Lovell-Smith

# Divine roses

Rose breeding still fascinates one of Christchurch's oldest rosarians, finds MARY LOVELL-SMITH.

**A** clutch of roses grows at the foot of the towering eastern wall of St Faith's Church in New Brighton. Buffeted by the prevailing winds off the sea a block down the road and warmed from the heat of the stone of the old church, the roses are like few growing anywhere else.

They have been bred by one of Christchurch's oldest rosarians, Ron Cattermole, 90. Slowed only by a recent stroke, Ron cherishes these roses gracing the grounds of the Anglican church that he and his family have attended since 1921, in the suburb where he has lived since he was four. They are his roses, bred by him during a decades-long breeding programme.

While many of his seedlings count among the dozens of roses lining the drive and helping to fill the small garden around his ownership flat, most of his roses are at the Bell property, the Canterbury Horticultural Society's two-hectare block of land in Barbers Road, Templeton. These were donated when he moved

14 years ago from the family home to a smaller property next door.

Of the hundreds of roses Ron bred from the 1970s until he stopped four years ago, only a handful were released commercially, despite their success in the national rose trials in Palmerston North.

Commercial success can very much depend on the capabilities of the nursery, in an industry notorious for its vagaries. The last time Ron invested in getting a rose released, his \$600 realised no return, so he is now content to give his roses to friends and real rose lovers.

You would be hard-pressed now to find many Cattermole roses in a catalogue, but in the 1980s, the pink-and-orange Kiwi Gold and crimson Elsie Wright were up there, after taking gold in the national trials in 1984 and 1985.

Elsie was named after Ron's aunt, Elsie Wright, who with her husband, Jim, farmed at Te Oka, past Tumble-down Bay, on Banks Peninsula, Ron explains. When Ron returned from serving in World War 2, in the Solomon Islands, he helped Elsie to tidy her garden.

"She was a great rose breeder. She set me off on rose breeding and growing roses from cuttings."

For nearly 30 years, however, rose breeding took second place to another hobby. "We all go away from horticulture for a bit," says Ron who, like his grandfather, was a cabinet-maker by trade.

"I was a fisherman for 30 years — in the Rakaia and the Waimakariri. I came back to it when my parents were starting to fade, and I started, pre-1970, to concentrate on roses."

Damask perfume in a yellow rose was Ron's holy grail. "I was looking for that terrific damask perfume."

His most successful rose, perhaps, was Royden, bred in the mid-1980s. "Royden is the key to all the roses I've bred since then," he says. The rose,

whose seed parent is the tall shell-pink Liverpool Echo and pollen parent the highly scented yellow Arthur Bell, is a bright-yellow rose, very vigorous, disease-resistant and with a powerful scent, he says.

"It took a while to catch on, but then it sold very well."

Another of its attributes for Ron was its readiness to accept pollen from other varieties.

"Most won't," he says.

Breeding roses is never an exact science, but Ron says it can be highly exciting and rewarding, and compared to daffodils, which he has also bred, very fast. A pile of notebooks, recording dates, descriptions and cross-references, testifies to the assiduousness with which Ron took to his new hobby.

A rose breeder will use two parents, he says. Both the pollen parent and the seed parent will be from a plant with good vigour, health, scent and form.

On a warm November day, Ron selects a bloom, preferably three-quarters open, to be the pollen parent. It is picked and its petals are stripped, but the stamens are left on.

He puts it in a hot cupboard on a piece of white paper. Within 24 hours, the pollen, either yellow or blue, will fall onto the paper.

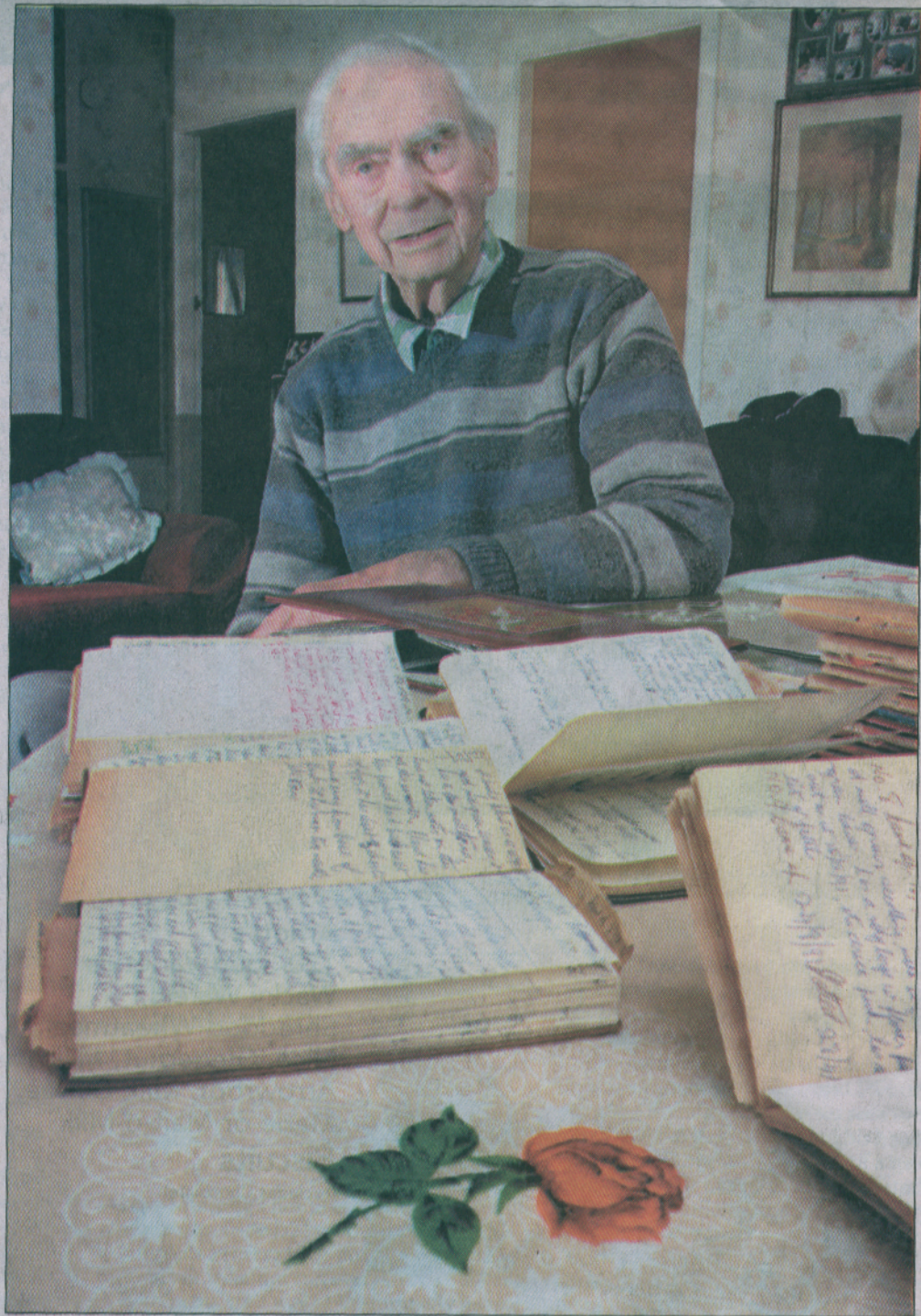
In the meantime, he has selected a bloom to be the seed parent — another top-line rose. Again, the bloom is three-quarters open and the petals and anthers are removed, leaving a pistil, although this time the flower is left on the plant.

Choosing a bloom not entirely open ensures getting to it before the bees do. If they get there first, a breeder's plans go down the plug-hole. Once the rose is stripped of its petals, "no self-respecting bee will come near it," Ron says.

Using a finger, he then dabs the pollen collected on the paper in the hot cupboard onto the pistil of the



**Lasting success:** Ron Cattermole's Royden rose was bred in the mid-1980s. Photo: John Kirk-Anderson



**Rewarding hobby:** Ron Cattermole with his pile of notebooks.

Photo: John Kirk-Anderson

seed parent. "You usually do it on a hot day, when it will disappear into the pistil within half an hour."

He describes the pollen's action as a downward explosion. "You'll know in a fortnight if it's taken or not."

When the chosen bloom's hip has ripened in autumn, Ron germinates the seed in seed-raising mix in pots. The number of seeds in a hip can vary, from one or two to 50. Floribundas have 30 to 40, Ron says.

Germination can be variable. "I have had thousands and thousands of seeds, and not got one up." Another year they all come up.

The young plant is sheltered in a warm spot and then all the breeder has to do is wait, with bated breath, until flowering occurs in October-November.

Will it be a winner?

"Every seed is different in every way," Ron says. "It's the uncertainty of the business. You don't know what you're going to get next year or the year after. That's what makes it so fascinating."

### Royden still a hit

Royden is a fine rose, says grower Tom Gilroy, of Gilroy Nurseries, which supplies garden centres throughout the South Island.

"It packs out well. Almost every plant I get is a first-grade rose.

"It has a bright lemon-yellow colour, which fades to cream, and a good fragrance. It is healthy, and has a tall, upright growth."

That Gilroy continues to grow Royden is testament enough, he says, when there are many roses that he has dropped off his list.