

# From Wimp to Goliath: Fortuniana as a Rose Rootstock

By Kitty Belendez

## 2013 AMERICAN ROSE SOCIETY AWARD OF MERIT WINNER

When I first heard about Fortuniana rootstock back in the early '90s it was more of a curiosity at that time. I had heard that they used Fortuniana rootstock in Florida because of nematodes. It was said that Fortuniana was resistant to nematodes. But we here in California didn't have nematode problems so the Dr. Huey rootstock that was (and still is) used as an understock (or rootstock) on the hybrid roses to give them vigor, was perfectly fine for us.

In the mid-90's I met a man that lived in Tennessee named Cecil Godman that was grafting hybrid teas onto Fortuniana. It wasn't the rootstock that was the lure for me, but rather Mr. Godman was offering very hard to find and exotic exhibition hybrid teas for sale. He had some for sale at an ARS convention and I bought 'Louise Estes' a hot exhibition rose at the time, and brought it home in my suitcase. Godman grafted them high using a clothespin to keep the graft in place. This was a true graft, not budding of an eye. Fortunately, I only bought that one rose from Godman. Although he had a very enticing long list of roses for sale, it wasn't long before he went out of business and stopped shipping orders.

That plant of Louise Estes did not grow very well for me, so I assumed it was because roses grafted on Fortuniana just didn't grow well here in Santa Clarita. Or perhaps the graft was bad. At any rate, the bush was discarded after several years of non-performance.

A few years later, I met another man, Johnny Becnel, that was grafting exhibition roses onto Fortuniana, and he lived in Louisiana. I ordered several roses from him but they barely grew at all. Those roses were Mavrik, Raspberry Swirls and Distant Sounds.

By 2000 I had pretty much given up buying very expensive roses (\$40 each) that refused to grow here. But I had

met Dona English (now Martin) at a convention and she was a huge fan of roses on Fortuniana. She lived in Arizona at the time, so I chalked her success up to the hot desert sands.

Well, Dona kept raving about Fortuniana so I decided to try a few more roses from Johnny Becnel. This time I ordered Cajun Moon and Hot Princess. They immediately grew very fast, so I ordered a few more varieties. Not too long after that we heard that Johnny Becnel had died, and his friend Calvin Boutte valiantly kept the business going for several years.

I tried another source (that I will not mention here), and 8 of the 12 roses I ordered had mosaic virus. That just broke my heart when I had to dig them up and throw them in the trash bin. Although virus isn't contagious, having mottling on the foliage that's caused by the virus, is a deal killer for a serious rose exhibitor like me.

As I was beginning my love affair with roses budded on Fortuniana rootstock, around 2005 I came across an online nursery in Florida that was contract budding Jackson & Perkins roses onto Fortuniana. They were guaranteed to be virus-free. So I ordered some of my favorites from them that performed so-so on Dr Huey, but which I loved their blooms. Abraham Darby, Gemini, Black Magic, Veterans' Honor, Julia Child, and Fourth of July came in and the bushes grew like crazy. After a couple years, this company had a falling out with J&P so my two favorite sources for roses on Fortuniana were no longer selling roses.

What to do? Well, I begged Bob to improve his skills with budding roses, and I ordered some virus-free Fortuniana rootstock sticks from UC Davis. We were going to bud our own roses and put them on Fortuniana.

At my direction, Bob started budding all kinds of roses already in our garden onto Fortuniana. We did everything, no holds barred. We did old garden roses like Rose de Rescht,



A Young Bush of Hybrid Tea 'Big Time'

Rose du Roi, and Francis Dubreuil. They grew fast and the plants got bigger than their own-root counterparts, producing longer stems and twice the number of blooms.

Next we tried some minifloras like Butter Cream, Whirlaway, and Dr. John Dickman. And we also did some miniatures like Lavender Spoon and Alysheba. Oh boy! They exceeded my wildest expectations, again producing twice the number of blooms.

Of course, we also did some hybrid teas. He budded Big Time, St Patrick, Red Intuition, Secret, and Hot Princess. Awesome! Those bushes grew to double the size of a bush budded onto Dr. Huey – between 6 and 8 feet tall.

I have to mention The Squire. Formerly a little 2-foot runt in my garden, Bob made me four bushes that grew to over 6-feet tall, with a continual load of dark red blooms. Same thing with Molineux, Fair Bianca, and Paul Ecke, Jr.

Last but not least the climbers, polyanthas, and floribundas. Shadow Dancer, Lavaglut, Puanani, Playgirl, Francois Rabelais, Sexy Remy, Purple Tiger, and Fabulous on Fortuniana have all exceeded their prior performance levels compared to when they were on Dr. Huey.

Should you wonder if there are any roses that don't vastly improve on Fortuniana? Yes. Most polyanthas, and the purple floribunda Ebb Tide remains the 18-inch runt it always was. But, I still love them anyway.

PHOTO BY KITTY BELENDEZ