The beauty of the ‘Hearts’ rose, the SAF Outstanding Varieties Competition “Best in Show,” has some “weak in the knees” and most aching for more of it.

BY MARY WESTBROOK

Photos by Betsy Hansen
In the early 2000s, breeders and growers working high in the Andes were dreaming of a crimson rose with a perfect heart-shaped center – a flower so romantic and spot-on for Valentine’s Day, it might have dropped fully formed from Cupid’s quiver. They could see it; they had seen it, at growing trials in the Netherlands. But they couldn’t make it thrive in Ecuador, despite favorable conditions (9,350-plus feet above sea level, proximity to the equator). The shape was off. The blossoms opened in a jumble. Frustrated, the group considered walking away, but the vision of that perfect rose pressed them forward. They tried different elevations, even different countries, until finally the rose came out right. A decade later, the one-of-a-kind rose snagged one of the floral industry’s most prestigious awards for new varieties.

Welcome to the made-for-Hollywood story of ‘Hearts’ Standard Rose, winner of Best in Show during the annual Outstanding Varieties Competition at SAF Phoenix 2013. For many growers and breeders, the competition is the culmination of years unrelenting work to make beautiful and marketable flowers for a worldwide audience was certainly true for Jan Spek Rosen and International Rose Breeders, the breeder and grower behind this year’s podium-topping winner.

“The key (to the success of ‘Hearts’) was recognizing that the unusual shape in the middle of the flower was actually a heart,” said Dean Rule, of International Rose Breeders, in Quito, Ecuador. While ‘Hearts’ is also grown in Colombia and Kenya, ultimately, “the unique shape is seen when the rose is grown in a cool climate at high altitude farms in Ecuador.”

In many ways, perfecting ‘Hearts’ was akin to finding the proverbial needle in the haystack. Bred Boskoop, the Netherlands, ‘Hearts’ was first introduced in Ecuador in 2004. The odds are stacked against any rose becoming a commercial staple, let alone an award winner, Rule said: “A successful commercial variety may be one in 10s of thousands of seeds, and a real winner (such as ‘Hearts’), one in hundreds of thousands of seeds.”

The unique look was not lost on judges or visitors during this year’s competition. “It made me weak in the knees,” admitted judge Nancy Hooper of Norton’s Flowers and Gifts in Ann Arbor, Mich. In addition to the attention-getting shape, ‘Hearts’ has “such fine details. You have to look at it for a while to really appreciate” all of the nuances, including long, strong stems and glossy, consistent foliage, which elevate the rose to a higher level, elegant rather than simply unexpected. The “whole package” attraction of ‘Hearts’ also ensures that the flower is not just a one-hit wonder with an interesting shape, said Rule.

“‘Hearts’ really is a florist’s rose,” he said. “The combination of a heart shape and red color give a florist an opportunity to market something special that also allows the buyer to have a story to tell when buying the rose as a gift or for their own use.”

For her part, judge Jessica Cosentino, AAF, of Cosentino’s Florist in Auburn, N.Y., was sold — as were many of the visitors to the Outstanding Varieties display throughout the week. “If you have this flower in your shop at Valentine’s Day, it will sell,” she said. “The color, the shape, the name — it has all of the Valentine’s Day traditions.”
During the competition, judge Brent Denham of Arizona Fresh Flowers in Phoenix kept returning to ‘Brilliant Stars Yellow’ Spray Rose. The sunny, warm buds were delicate but powerful. “They were pretty awesome,” Denham said, calling the variety a personal favorite. “They looked just like regular standard roses,” but had all the benefits and versatility of sprays, which would allow designers plenty of creativity, particularly for event work (think: wedding boutonnieres, said judge Joost Bongaerts of Florabundance in Carpinteria, Calif.).

Like Denham, judge Josh Glass of Trochta’s Flowers and Garden Center in Oklahoma City lingered by ‘Brilliant Stars Yellow’, pulling out a stem to admire the variety more closely. The blossoms were plentiful but not overwhelming, he said. “It was a nice burst of color that wouldn’t take over a design.”

On the hunt for varieties that were “on trend” for color, Bongaerts singled out ‘Safina’, and its rich fall hues (golden yellows and rusts). The 12-day vase life makes it a bargain for customers looking for an injection of autumn after the long, hot summer.

The color combination helps reinvent the often-overlooked chrysanthemum, an everyday workhorse that just happens to be quite a lovely flower, Cosentino said, noting that the general public, and sometimes florists, too often pin mums as “funeral” flowers. The knockout colors on ‘Safina’ reposition the flower as something decidedly vibrant — new, stylish and “geared toward fall.”
Bongaerts took one look at ‘Ravenna’ and thought of two words: corporate work. “The oriental lilies in this year’s competition were very good,” particularly ‘Ravenna’, he said. Among the standout qualities: strong stems, healthy green foliage and a not-overpowering fragrance,” he said. “‘Ravenna’ would be great for linear-style arrangements.”

Part of the variety’s allure is its picture-perfect presentation — pure white edges, spot-free petals. In California, Kitayama Brothers grows ‘Ravenna’ in greenhouses with sandy soil. The grower said, those conditions benefit stem length, flower shape, size color and scent. As delicate as the flower might look, it’s also a hardy selection and a good shipper with a 12- to 18-day vase life.

> Cosentino had a major crush on a majorly orange variety on the display table: “‘Ultima’ was so bold, bright and strong,” she said. “When you looked at the table, that’s all you saw.” The charm of ‘Ultima’ goes far beyond simply turning heads; the gerbera also has a deep black center anchoring the fiery petals. “With a lot of gerberas, you look at them and the center is off, or inconsistent,” Cosentino said. “Not these. Every single one was perfect.”

When veteran attendee (and past judge) BJ Dyer, AAF, AIFD, of Bouquets in Denver, stopped by the competition, his eye went to ‘Ultima’, too. He could see the large flower flourishing in event work. “As a florist who specializes in events, it’s perfect,” he said. “We finally have an orange-colored blossom that can hold its own and balance out other jumbo-sized blossoms at a wedding or on a stage... Orange is the new black, right?”
The whimsical bedding plant is perfect for hanging baskets and containers, but it will also work well in gardens (spring and fall), according to Sakata Seed America, the company behind the Outstanding Varieties winner. This year, judges thought the colors of ‘Candy Showers’ would be just right for monoculture designs, though the blooms readily complement other varieties, too. Strong, flexible stems ensure good shipping outcomes and florists can expect fully opened florets; the buds on the upper portion show color first.

The “spectacular foliage” of ‘Silver Tree’ drew a crowd during the competition showcase, but the leucadendron already has fans in high places. Last year, Diana Roy of Resendiz Brothers Protea Growers in Fallbrook, Calif., counted at least eight Rose Parade floats with lots (and lots) of ‘Silver Tree.’ “When the float designers want something to be shimmery or silvery, they use it,” she said. Designers also like the large, broadly pointed green leaves. “‘Silver Tree’ is used in a lot of wedding work, because of the color but also because the leaves are so flexible,” Roy said. “It can really kick bouquets up a notch.”
What happens when you take the best qualities of two much-loved flowers and present them in one variety: No surprise, people love it.

The second annual People’s Choice honors went to ‘Gembrook’ Telopea, a novelty flower that looks something like a protea and a pincushion, in whatever mad, wonderful world the two came together. For the uninitiated, Telopea, or Waratah, actually represents a genus of five species, endemic to Australia; ‘Gembrook’ comes from the Victoria region. “There’s really nothing like it out there,” said Diana Roy of Resendiz Brothers Protea Growers in Fallbrook, Calif. While not unheard of in the U.S. — when the Bellagio Hotel in Las Vegas upgraded its entryway several years ago, designers incorporated telopea — it’s still a relatively novel sight, Roy said. “It’s one of the more spectacular members of the protea family, with lots of color options,” Roy said, “but it takes a long time to grow.”

Judges and visitors seemed to agree the wait (and hard work) paid off. “This was a really pretty one,” said judge Josh Glass of Trochta’s Flowers and Garden Center in Oklahoma City. “It was impressive all around, with its coloring and foliage, and you can’t beat it for long-lasting” given the three-week vase life.

“The stem is strong with beautiful foliage; it’s tall and stately,” said Ardith Beveridge, AAF, AIFD, PFCI, of Koehler and Dramm’s Institute of Floristry in Minneapolis, who imagined adding the flower to bridal bouquets for a unique look or showcasing it in a monobotanical design. “It’s a showstopper,” she said, “hot and happening.”

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Perfect. Stunning. Incredible. That’s how judge after judge (and florist after florist) described the prize-winning phalaenopsis from Farm Fresh Orchids. The blossoms (5.5 inches in diameter, with seven to nine open per stem) arrived without bruises or blemishes. Grown in California, the exclusive orchid would generate a tremendous appeal for brides, said Lisa Weddell, AIFD, PFCI, of L Weddel Design in Highlands Ranch, Colo. “Brides keep coming in with pictures of phalaenopsis, and these would be wonderful to have in store,” she said. “Each bloom is so consistent and so perfect.” Cosentino echoed the sentiment: “Brides will love these and so will designers,” she said. “Any time we get in orchids, we’re always clipping something, but with these… I touched them immediately, just to make sure they were real.”

While taking notes in the competition room, Dyer stopped to notice something else, namely a constant stream of hotel workers, all headed to the same place, the Galpinii Bruniaceae, from Resendiz Brothers Protea Growers. “People kept coming over to touch it and smell it,” he said. “I think it was because it’s so alien looking. They were taking joy in it.” Glass also classified the Galpinii as a personal favorite. “It represented so many textures and it would work in larger or smaller arrangements,” he said. “When I walked through the competition, I kept asking myself, ‘Is this variety practical, with multiple uses?’ Galpinii was.”

Cosentino saw the variety as a way to educate customers on off-the-beaten-track options and set an independent retail shop apart from mass-market competitors. Brides, she said, would love the deep green, pine-like foliage and crowded berry-like knobs that provide Galpinii with that alien look. “For me, seeing the crowd around Galpinii reiterated how important it is to have interesting foliage and accompanying accents,” Dyer said.
Bright, lustrous red bracts. A compact, light green rosette. These were just some of the attributes that left Outstanding Varieties visitors and judges bowing down to the Emperor. Beveridge was among many to point to the flower’s “graceful curves” and elegant foliage. The dependable variety appeals to exotic-loving clients who want a big shot of color, but designers know that it’s a selection that will last a long time and adapt to its environment.
> **HEART BREAKER**

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**Best In Class**

**Alstroemeria**

‘SYLVAN’

FLORES FUNZA

> The bi-color pink shading of ‘Sylvan’ was a hit with judges but when Cosentino checked out the cheerful variety, she had more practical concerns in mind. “I’ve never seen such thick, powerful stems,” she said. “That tells me, as a florist, that these flowers are going to get the nutrients they need and last longer” than other, similar varieties.

In fact, the variety boasts a 12- to 15-day vase life. Also a hit: ‘Sylvan’ has beautiful, consistent green foliage.

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**Dianthus**

‘STAR CHERRY TESSINO’

GOLDEN FLOWERS

> With its dreamy white and pink hues and star-shaped petals, ‘Star Cherry Tessino’ is a “new twist on an old favorite,” said Glass. “The white edges and pink center made it almost variegated. It’s a nice update to a classic look.”

The petals, said Ardith Beveridge, AAF, AIFD, PFCI, of Koehler and Dramm’s Institute of Floristry in Minneapolis, “look as they have been trimmed with pinking sheers on fabric.” Expect a vase life of 12 days. A final bonus? This variety is disease resistant and a strong producer, promised Jody Whitekus of Golden Flowers in Miami.
Of the 40 companies exhibiting at the SAF Outstanding Varieties competition some left with more ribbons than a gift-wrap department. Those with the biggest haul include:

**Golden Flowers,** GoldenFlowers.com
10 ribbons: 2 Best in Class, 2 Blue, 8 Red

**Esmeralda Farms,** Inc., EsmeraldaFarms.com
7 ribbons: 1 Best in Class, 4 Blue, 3 Red

**Rosen Tantau,** Rosen-Tantau.com
7 ribbons: 2 Blue, 5 Red

**Holland America Flowers LLC,** HollandAmericaFlowers.com
6 ribbons: 1 Blue, 5 Red

**Oregon Flowers,** Inc., OregonFlowers.com
6 ribbons: 1 Blue, 5 Red

In addition, the following companies earned either blue or red ribbons:

**Cal Glads,** calglads.com

**Dramm & Echter,** drammechter.com

**Farm Fresh Orchids,** farmfreshorchids.com

**Flores Funza,** floresfunza.com

**Flower Village,** flowervillage-ec.com

**Green Point Nurseries,** Inc., greenpointnursery.com

**Groflowers,** groflowers.net

**International Rose Breeders LLC,** http://eghillcompany.com

**Kent’s Bromeliad Nursery,** Inc., kentsbromeliad.com

**Kitayama Bros.,** Inc., kbflowers.com

**Liberty Blooms,** libertyblooms.com

**Mellano & Company,** mellano.com

**Miaflora Farms LLC,** miaflora.com

**Multiflora International,** multiflora.com

**Ocean View Flowers,** oceanviewflowers.com

**Poulsen Roser A/S,** poulsenroser.com

**Pyramid Flowers,** Inc., pyramidflowers.com

**Resendiz Brothers Protea Growers,** http://resendizbrothers.com

**Rio Roses,** rioroses.com

**Rosa Flora Limited,** rosaflora.com/

**Rosaprima,** rosaprima.com

**Royal Flowers,** royalflowers.ecuador.com

**Sakata Seed America,** sakata.com

**Sole Farms,** solefarms.com

**Suasque,** suasque.com

**Sun Valley Floral Farms,** thesunvalleygroup.com

**The Elite Flower,** eliteflower.com

**Transflora,** transflora.net

**Wafex USA,** wafex.com.au

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**Blue Ribbon Winners**

‘**Voyager’ Alstroemeria, Flores Funza**

“There was a great display of color among the alstroemeria this year — pinks, purples, yellows,” Cosentino said. She particularly liked the “zebra- or tiger-like pattern” of ‘Voyager’ because it gave the blooms more texture. “I voted highly for them, and I bet they last beautifully,” given their healthy-looking foliage and sturdy stems. Flores Funza, the company behind the winning variety said to expect a 12- to 15-day vase life.

‘**First Lady’ Standard Rose, Rio Roses and Rosen Tantau**

Both Rio Roses, in Miami, and Rosen Tantau, in Germany, won blue ribbons for their ‘First Lady’ roses. Judges admired the “perfectly beautiful opening” of the rose, along with its “elegant, white-cream” tones and “classic” rose scent. The flower looks delicate, but the shape of the bloom actually helps decrease the chance of bruising during shipments, according to Rosen Tantau.

‘**Black Pearl’ Standard Rose, Rosaprima**

Volcanic soil and bright equatorial sun provide the nutrients necessary for ‘Black Pearl’s’ decadent red shade, said Nicholas Chang of Rosaprima, in Cumbaya, Ecuador. The rose has a mild fragrance and large, full blooms (40 to 45 petals each) and impressive longevity. “It takes four days to fully open and then total aperture lasts for another 12 days,” Chang said. The rose is exclusive to Rosaprima.
‘Hokuloa’ Anthurium, Green Point Nurseries
‘Hokuloa’, the Hawaiian name for the planet Venus, is meant to evoke romantic nights, and for visitors to the competition, it did just that. The spathe measures 5.5 inches long and almost 5 inches wide; it’s broad and heart-shaped with open lobes. The buttery yellow spadix lightens to white as ‘Hokuloa’ matures. Expect a vase life of at least two weeks.

‘Gypsy’ Anthurium, Green Point Nurseries
Lily Pulitzer fans take note: With a hint of red and pink and a green spathe that measures 8 inches long and 6 inches wide, ‘Gypsy’ is an eye-catching variety with lots of practical applications. Judges liked the presentation of the colors and the vase life (two weeks, or longer). The variety’s colors are intensified by a high gloss.

‘Paloma’ Rose, Rosen Tantau
Looking for a slow-opening novelty rose with red and white coloring? Meet ‘Paloma.’ The variety is a force to be reckoned with, thanks to hot-colored petals, but the strong stems and deeply hued lush foliage make it a practical selection, too — not to mention a vase life that extends 15 days.

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Blue Ribbon Winners

‘Royal Flush’ Spray Rose, The Elite Flower
Jacob H McCall, AAF, AIFD, director of Design and Marketing at The Elite Flower in Miami said the tangerine-colored blossoms of ‘Royal Flush’ give the spray rose a “huge color impact” in designs. More like mini garden roses than traditional sprays, the blossoms benefit from high petal counts. “The flowers open to full rose-shaped blooms,” McCall said. “They’re gorgeous.”

‘Vincent’s Fresh’ Sunflower, Sakata Seed America
Part of a new series of sunflowers, ‘Vincent’s Fresh’ is less sensitive to day length than older varieties, which gives growers more flexibility. Designers admired the flower’s rounded, overlapping petals and crisp-green center. “I loved the yellowness of it — and that green center,” said Glass. “It had pretty foliage as well. I think any retail florist would recognize the benefits — it’s beautiful, long lasting and low maintenance.” ‘Vincent’s Fresh’ is also pollen-less, which helps provide for clean heads throughout the supply chain.

‘Original Love’ LA Lily, Oregon Flowers
Available year-round — but especially popular in the fall — ‘Original Love’ is a tall, strong, red flowering LA hybrid that lasts for up to 10 days. “It’s one of six varieties that we include in our Novelty LA Hybrids line,” explained Martin Meskers, the owner of Oregon Flowers in Aurora, Ore. Other colors include yellow, orange, pink and white. Part of the popularity of the lily centers on the fact that it’s priced between Asiatic and Oriental lilies, “with the added benefit of having a nice fragrance that isn’t as strong as Oriental lilies,” Meskers said.

‘Mother of Pearl’ Rose, International Rose Breeders
Brides and grooms who dream of a vintage-inspired big day will go crazy for ‘Mother of Pearl’, an Instagram-ready combination of antique pink and champagne shades. The long lasting variety (12- to 14-day vase life) has an elegant shape that retains a modern look, even as it harkens back to simpler times.

‘Showtime Checkmate’ Standard Rose, Esmeralda Farms
The intense red of ‘Showtime Checkmate’ makes it a winner for everyday designs and special occasions (Valentine’s Day, anyone?), according to judges. Stems measure 20 to 35 inches and bloom size is generally about 2.5 inches. Expect a vase life of 10 to 12 days.

‘Moonlight Delight’ Wax Flower, WAFEX USA
With waxy white blossoms complemented by a backdrop of fresh green foliage, ‘Moonlight Delight’ drew rave reviews and created a stunning display. “Size matters,” Dyer said. “When we first started using wax flower, it was more like baby’s breath, but today the blossoms are much bigger and it doesn’t get confused” with gypsophila.
Heart Breaker

‘Overtime’ Gypsophila, Esmeralda Farms
Big and luminous with white semi-double flowers, ‘Over Time’ has a number of standout qualities: good flower density, even distribution and hefty stem weight. Its excellent vase life and uniform opening make it a cost-effective and beautiful addition to designs.

‘Dark Green Anastasia’ Chrysanthemum, Solé Farms
The large, deep green spider mum opens fully with clean foliage. “It does not turn yellow, and it hydrates faster than regular ‘Green Anastasia,’” promised Johan Sohn of Solé Farms. Vase life is 10 to 12 days.

Brilliants tarsesmr107’spray rose, Esmeralda Farms
This cream and pink variety yields five or more blooms per stem and has a vase life of about 10 days — or more. The shiny foliage is eye-catching but also resistant to stress. Blooms open uniformly atop 20- to 30-inch stems.

‘Natalia’ Oriental Lily, Sun Valley Floral Farms
Like other Rose Lilies, the pollen-free ‘Natalia’ is becoming a more popular choice among consumers — provided they’ve had the chance to see a flower in person. “We are seeing demand for these lilies rise as they get more exposure,” said Lane DeVries, president and CEO of The Sun Valley Group in Arcata, Calif. “This lily appeals to consumers who are flower connoisseurs; they really value the uniqueness of the stunning blooms,” he said. Hooper was smitten when she saw the pale pink variety. “It was incredible and memorable,” she said.

‘White Chocolate’ Standard Rose, Terra Nigra
The beauty of ‘White Chocolate’ is that it becomes more beautiful as it opens, said Christa Boerlage, general manager of Terra Nigra Inc., in the Netherlands. “When it opens, it shows a creamy color that is similar to the color of white chocolate.” Stunning in a monochromatic bouquet, ‘White Chocolate’ is an obvious pick for weddings; brides will love its long stems and your design team will appreciate the long vase life and complete opening.

‘Shimmer’ Gerbera, The Elite Flower
The pink and white gerbera is “one of the most striking I’ve ever laid eyes on,” said McCall, of ‘Shimmer’. The high petal count and movement from hot pink to stark white make it attractive to brides. “The center of ‘Shimmer’ is dark black, which is a perfect tie in with today’s trends as brides are actually very specific for asking for dark centers in the gerberas.”
“What we learn in congressional offices provides great insight into the political process. Whether I like what I hear or not, it is important to gain more understanding of what makes Washington tick.”

Rod Saline, AAF Engwall Florist & Greenhouses, Inc. Duluth, Minn.

Mary Westbrook is a contributing editor and writer for Floral Management.

mwestbrook@safnow.org