

Bulgaria's Rare Rose Oil for Perfumes May Be Rarer After a Bad Winter

By JOHN DARNTON

Special to The New York Times

KAZANLIK, Bulgaria, June 20 — The Valley of Roses, which cuts through central Bulgaria like a vast, sweet-smelling pink and white sea, is to perfume what the vineyards of Rheims are to French champagne.

The Rose of Kazanlik, a damasque rose that thrives only in its native valley between the Balkan and Sredna Gora ranges, gives off an especially pungent and long-lasting aroma. Its oil is prized as the base for the world's most expensive fragrances. Accordingly, perfume manufacturers from Paris to New York keep an eye on the annual rose harvest here. This year, the news is not good.

An unusual cold spell in January sent temperatures to minus 22 Fahrenheit in the valley basin, freezing the rose plants. The result in many parts of the valley may be the worst crop since World War II, when Germany, Bulgaria's ally, encouraged farmers to uproot rose bushes and plant potatoes.

"These freezes happen once in every 30 or 50 years," said Nikola Stefanov Astadjov, deputy director of the Research Institute for Oil-Bearing Roses, Aromatic and Medicinal Plants. "There was one in 1952 but it was on a lesser scale. We don't remember any as bad as this one."

"What usually hurts the roses is cold wind," he explained. "This year, roses at the foot of the mountains did not suffer as much as those right in the valley. In some cases the part of the plant in the snow was preserved and only the part sticking above was lost."

Kazanlik Area Suffered Most

Mr. Astadjov estimated the crop loss around Kazanlik at 30 percent. But he said that a decent harvest in other parts of the valley and country, aided by heavy rains in May, might mean only a 10 percent drop in overall production.

It is impossible to say whether the poor crop here will send up the price of perfume. That depends upon rose oil production in other countries such as the Soviet Union, Turkey, France and Morocco and

also upon the amount of attar that has been stockpiled, under heavy security, in bank vaults in Sofia.

The production and sale of rose oil, which brings about \$2,270 a pound, is regarded as almost classified information in Bulgaria, a tradition that dates back to

roguish, double-dealing Turkish rose-oil merchants three centuries ago.

The production of rose oil here, Mr. Astadjov said, began about 1580 when Kazanlik's Turkish governor visited the pasha of Damascus. Struck by the beautiful fragrance, he discovered that it came

from the distillation of a flower blossom that looked very much like one back home. He soon produced a superior product, which was marketed in small wooden barrels throughout the Ottoman Empire.

In 1842, a local merchant named Shipkov brought a sample of the Bulgarian attar to Paris and found he could sell it at twice the price of gold. By the end of the century, Bulgaria was satisfying 80 percent of the world's craving for this exotic scent. Over the last 200 years, it has exported 300 tons of rose oil.

Other countries have horned in on the market, but the rose of Kazanlik is still the best. "Every famous French perfume uses it," said Mr. Astadjov. "The aroma is stronger, and more lasting. One of its best qualities is that it lends stability to the entire composition." With Bulgarian rose oil, a woman's perfume will not fade before the evening is done, he observed.

Exactly why is still a mystery. Mr. Astadjov said that his institute's research had so far identified 150 components, mostly alcohols, ether oil and waxes, and that chemical analysis performed in Japan had turned up 400 components.

Unique Soil and Climate

Another property of the rose is that it will not emigrate. "For the last 200 years, many attempts have been made to plant it elsewhere," he said. "It has always changed the rose. Here is a unique combination of soil and climate. The Balkan Mountains shelter the valley from the northern winds and the Sredna Gora to the south from the summer heat."

The bloom of the rose lasts 20 to 25 days. It must be picked by hand between 5 A.M. and 10 A.M. as the sun coaxes the flower to open, when the oil is at its height.

"It's very pleasant work," said Mr. Astadjev, whose father and grandfather were rose farmers. As he toured a field, he came upon a rose that had just opened. "This one should have been picked this morning," he said, snapping it off expertly at the top of the stem and holding it to his nose.

Blocked due to copyright.
See full page image or
microfilm.

Associated Press

TRUDEAU IN LONDON FOR TALKS: Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau of Canada introducing his son, Justin, to Britain's Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, outside 10 Downing Street. Mr. Trudeau and Mrs. Thatcher met to continue talks they had begun at the Venice summit conference.

The New York Times

Published: June 26, 1980

Copyright © The New York Times