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LOVE'S FAIREST FLOWER

The lure and the lore of the roses

BY CAROL POLSKY

VALENTINE'S DAY IS UPON US AND WITH IT, the yearly glorification, the triumph, the tyranny of the red, red rose. Statistics show that about 110 million red roses are sold every year around Valentine's Day.

Flowers of any kind didn't become popular for Valentine's Day until the early 1900s. Lacy cards were the preferred token of affection before florists got smart with a "Let Flowers be Your Valentine" ad campaign. And even then, roses were trailing. Violets were the first flower of choice.

In the 1600s, a symbolic language of flowers developed in Constantinople. Eventually, it was introduced to Europe and blossomed in France. There it evolved into a handbook of 800 floral messages known as *Le Langage des Fleurs*, by which lovers could communicate through the contents of a bouquet. If you say it with flowers, red roses meant beauty, love and passion.

Floral industry polls and surveys and female buying patterns indicate that women often prefer roses of another color besides red, but it's the rare man who'll dare another hue - or flower - on Valentine's Day. That takes daring romantics like actor Matthew Broderick who gave his fashionista wife, actress Sarah Jessica Parker, Cattleya orchids and purple Agapanthus last year. Cutting-edge florists sniff at the venerable airy bouquet of long-stem roses offset by fillers of white baby's breath.

"Red roses and the baby's breath is so archaic, it's like the dinosaur," says Luis Collazo, owner of Lotus, a trendy store in lower Manhattan, who supplied the orchids and agapanthus to Broderick last year.



FLOWERS BY BOTANICALS INC., CHICAGO

Collazo's arrangements feature red roses, yes, but with a mixture of varieties of varied colors and shapes, mingled with exotic greenery and with other flowers in shades of purple, fuchsia and orange - orchids, Muscari or grape hyacinths, a lily-relative called Sandersonia. For Valentines sent to men, he produces a "masculine" bouquet using roses with seeds and pods.

"Combining them all together is a much more interesting and new way of approaching Valentines," he says. "The typical red rose, nobody really cares about that anymore. ... You need a punch, you need a twist."

"You won't see any roses and baby's breath coming out of here," says Casey Cooper, owner of Botanicals in Chicago, which provided the flower arrangements for Oprah Winfrey's recent 50th birthday party. 🍀