

Plants are people too

by Lily Fox-Bruguère - April 23, 2015

In my family, when it comes to plants named after people, we can't help but speak about them as if they are people too. Someone might ask, "What kind of clematis is that there?" and my mom would answer, "Oh, that's Nelly Moser, she's such a refined and dependable lady." Nelly Moser, the clematis, not the woman, graced the front corner of my grandmother's side porch for as long as I can remember, adorning herself with magenta-striped flowers for weeks. But who exactly was the real Nelly Moser, and why was a plant named after her?

At Monticello's Thomas Jefferson Center for Historic Plants, this is just the sort of question we like to answer. In addition to preserving and distributing a wide range of historic and native plant species and cultivars, we also collect and share their stories: how and when they were introduced to gardens, the many ways they have been used by people from different places and cultures, and how they got their names. These often intriguing stories add another layer to their importance, enticing people beyond aesthetic appeal to save such plants in their own gardens.



Nelly Moser Clematis

Plant names, common and scientific, may tell us about a plant's flower color (*Lobelia cardinalis* (<https://www.monticello.org/bigtree/blog/edit/107/~https://www.monticello.org/house-gardens/in-bloom-at-monticello/cardinal-flower/>)), medicinal uses (*Salvia officinalis* (<https://www.monticello.org/house-gardens/in-bloom-at-monticello/sage/>)), or place of origin (*Echinacea tennesseensis*); they might honor a Greek god (*Asclepias tuberosa* (<https://www.monticello.org/house-gardens/in-bloom-at-monticello/butterfly-weed/>)), a member of royalty (Duchesse de Brabant Rose), or the granddaughter of Charles Darwin (Nora Barlow Columbine (<https://www.monticello.org/house-gardens/in-bloom-at-monticello/nora-barlow-columbine/>)). Although she has unfortunately proven difficult to find, Nelly Moser was surely someone dear to the French plant breeder Marcel Moser, who named this popular, barred hybrid after her in 1897.

Here at Monticello it goes without saying that we take a special interest in all things Jeffersonian, so I daresay that the most celebrated plant in the gardens here is the Twinleaf (*Jeffersonia diphylla* (<https://www.monticello.org/house-gardens/in-bloom-at-monticello/twinleaf/>)), a lovely yet rather unassuming native wildflower named for Thomas Jefferson in his lifetime. In 1792 at a meeting of the American Philosophical

Society in Philadelphia, Dr. Benjamin Smith Barton named this genus *Jeffersonia* in honor of Jefferson and his knowledge in the field of natural history, most notably in botany and zoology. Apparently Jefferson was not shy about displaying his namesake, as he devoted an entire oval bed in the gardens at Monticello to this spring-blooming ephemeral. Visitors often smile when they hear that our native Twinleaf will sometimes honor Jefferson in its own way by opening its pure white flowers on his birthday, April 13. There is only one other species in this genus, unknown in Jefferson's time, called *Jeffersonia dubia*, the Asian Twinleaf. *J. dubia* blooms a few weeks before our native Twinleaf, bearing pale lavender-colored flowers and leaves that are almost entirely round, while the *diphylla* leaf is nearly divided in two as the name indicates.



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Asian Twinleaf - *Jeffersonia dubia*

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Twinleaf (*Jeffersonia diphylla*)

Inspired by Jefferson, who sought out roses for his gardens at Monticello and Poplar Forest, his private retreat near Lynchburg, Virginia, we cultivate a large collection of antique roses at the Center, with a special focus on Noisette roses.

Tens of the Noisettes growing in the Center's Léonie Bell Rose Garden begin with the little-known American origin

story of this class of highly fragrant, repeat-blooming roses. In the early 19th century John Champneys of Charleston, South Carolina, selected a rose seedling from his garden that was beautifully scented and flowered continuously—two very desirable qualities in a rose. Champneys shared this rose with his neighbor, Frenchman Philippe Noisette, another rose

enthusiast who began to experiment with Champneys' rose. Phillippe, along with his rose-breeding brother, Louis, in France, then went on to develop the valuable class of roses that bears their name to this day. The centerpiece of one of the beds in our rose garden is 'Champneys Pink Cluster,' believed to be a descendant of Champneys' original rose seedling. This special rose stands tall, bearing many clusters of pale pink, double flowers that emit a sweet scent from May through October, a fitting tribute to the man who first recognized the significance of this rose.

Very soon after my grandmother passed away, her Nelly Moser Clematis suddenly died. A number of years later, we offered Nelly Moser Clematis at the Center for Historic Plants, and I quickly got one for my mother's garden. It's so nice to have our old friend back with us again; as we admire her beauty, we feel as if we have a small part of my grandmother back with us as well.

See many of these same plants growing in the preservation display gardens at the Center for Historic Plants and purchase them for your own garden during our open houses. Find details [here about the Center for Historic Plants and our open house events \(https://www.monticello.org/house-gardens/center-for-historic-plants/\)](https://www.monticello.org/house-gardens/center-for-historic-plants/).



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Léonie Bell Rose Garden at the Center for Historic Plants; Champneys' Pink Cluster is the tallest rose on the right side of the image.

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