



Prairie Lily Breeders:

Robert Simonet and the "Rescued Lilies"

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ROBERT SIMONET was born near Paris, France, in 1903; he lived with his grandmother for eleven years and had already become interested in gardening at this early age. When he was sixteen, he accompanied his sister to Edmonton, Alberta, where she was to marry a Canadian soldier. Here in Canada his first work was helping local farmers in the summertime. Later he worked at the Misericordia Hospital as a steam engineer and also as a fireman; he also worked at market gardening in the summer. Eventually he had to choose between going further in steam engineering or going into market gardening on his own; and in 1930 he started his own market garden, growing fresh vegetables, as well as gladioli, cut-flowers, and bedding plants. His interest in flowers and vegetables expanded in many directions, and he grew with expertise and with an eye to improvement such diverse crops as early sweet corn, early tomatoes, parsnips, squash, red rhubarb, hardy runnerless strawberries, and many hardy fruits, shrubs, and trees.

During the Second World War, all trade was stopped with Japan; and at that time, the secret of breeding a completely true strain of double petunias was known only to the Japanese. George Ball Seed Company consequently was unable to acquire petunia seed which would produce only double forms. At this time, Robert Simonet went to the University of Alberta's library to study plant breeding and genetics. In only three years, he had produced a strain of petunias that produced 100% double forms, and he was the first person outside of Japan to accomplish this. He produced the double petunias in nine colours, and later he developed the large-flowered double forms.

His first interest in lilies was aroused by *Lilium philadelphicum*, the beautiful species native to Alberta. Robert received his first trumpet lilies from Fred Tarlton and a local garden seed company. His work with the Asiatic lilies started with seed he acquired from Percy Wright of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. This was seed from 'Nubian,' and from it he eventually produced 'Black Butterfly' and later 'Summer Night,' the darkest, near-black red which I have seen. It holds the deep colour until the petals dry up. He got lily seed from the *L. cernuum* breeding lines of Bert Porter of Parkside, Saskatchewan, which came by way of Percy Wright and which go back to the world-famous crosses made by Dr. Patterson linking *L. cernuum* and *L. davidii*. This seed then produced the lily 'Embarrassment,' which bears many pinkish, out-facing flowers and is fairly tall. It was originally sold in Canada as 'Pink Scottiae' before being registered as 'Embarrassment.' It received the name 'Embarrassment' because its color suggested to Mr. Simonet the blush that would colour a lady's face if she heard an off-colour joke.

My interest in growing flowers began in the late 1960's. I was planning on growing perennial flower plants for sale at this time. Because of low farm prices, we were getting only sixty-five cents for a bushel of barley; and I thought it would be easier to grow a plant or bulb for one dollar than to grow a bushel of grain for the same price. At that time I knew almost nothing about lilies. I bought a copy of the North American Lily Society's *Gets Grow Lilies*, and I joined the North American Lily Society. I also found the names of lily growers on the Canadian Prairies.

Among these lily growers were such men as Bert Porter, Percy Wright, Fred Tarlton, and Robert Simonet. I started to write to them, looking for information and help; and I have found these persons, as well as many others, to be helpful and generous with their time, information, seeds, and bulbs. I am very grateful for their generous help-but my greatest debt is to Robert Simonet.

I corresponded with Robert for two years, and with the others for even longer, before meeting them. Because the haying season comes at the same time that the lilies flower, I found it hard to get to see these lily breeders and their works. In the fall of 1972, however, we finally were able to visit with Robert and his wife. He showed us around their twelve acres, much of which was planted in fruiting bushes and trees, perennials, flowers, strawberries, and both Asiatic and trumpet lilies.

Later that winter Fred Tarlton showed me slides of trumpet lilies growing in his garden. I just could not believe that such lilies could be grown on our Canadian Prairies, where temperatures may drop as low as forty or fifty degrees Fahrenheit below zero.

On this first visit with Robert Simonet, he gave me a dozen Asiatic lily seedlings and a dozen trumpet lily seedlings. Out of these Asiatics, I named my first lily, 'Robert Simonet,' which is three to three and one-half feet tall and carries up to thirty-six purplish-pink, down-facing flowers. I also selected from this group a dark red, up-facing seedling, which I plan to name. While visiting Robert again in the winter of 1972-1973, I learned that he planned to plow under part of his lily plot, because he had already removed from it all the seedlings which interested him. In the spring of 1973, he gave me about two hundred bulbs from a cross involving a dark red and a *Cernuum* hybrid, as well as a washtub full of trumpet bulbs. I got a few breeding seedlings from this lot. I was extremely excited and pleased with these, for they were a great improvement over the lilies I had! While visiting with him again in the summer of 1973, I found that he had not yet plowed under all the lilies scheduled for destruction; but he was still planning to plow them under eventually. I asked him if I could mark those lilies which interested me, and I marked about seventy plants. He dug them for me that fall and brought them along on his first visit here.

I am not saying that there were not other lilies equally as good or better at that time, unknown to me-but these lilies were certainly better than any I had seen before! My great admiration for the Simonet lilies, too, is in no way a detraction from the work of other breeders. It was after I saw the Simonet lilies that I became very interested in lily breeding; I am now using his lilies and their seedlings in my breeding work in many of my own

crosses. It saddens me to think of how many other good lilies may have been plowed under. Robert had no way of knowing just how great his work was at that time, for he neither visited other lily breeders nor bought any new named lilies.

I call these lilies the "Rescued Series," for indeed they were rescued from the plow. I have named eight of them at the present, and I will probably eventually name three more. Most of these lilies are now being grown and tested in Canada and the United States, and a few are being tested in Holland as possible cut-flower and pot lilies. I think that these lilies are, and will be, stepping stones to many better lilies in the future.

Here are brief descriptions of the clones presently named:

'Elenore Edna'- July blooming, upright, thirty-two to thirty-six inches tall. Deep wine-red flowers with buds that turn brilliant red several days before opening. A smooth, cup-shaped bloom with wide petals that do not recurve. Similar to 'Wanda,' but with green stems and pedicels.

'Lily Simonet'- Mid-July blooming, upright, three feet tall. Bright medium red with a few spots, wide petals with a creamy star formed by the nectary furrows. Eighteen or more buds well placed on an excellent flower head.

'Margorie Linda'-Early July blooming, out- to down-facing, three feet tall. Spotless red-orange flowers on a large, well-spaced inflorescence. Pedicels long and graceful; flowers lightly recurved.

'Robert Simonet'- Mid-July blooming, down-facing, three feet tall. Purplish- pink flowers, up to thirty-six well-spaced buds. An excellent increaser.

'Wanda'- Mid-July blooming, upright, three to three and one-half feet tall. Wine-red, flat flowers with broad petals and excellent substance; reddish stems and pedicels.

'Carol Jean'-Mid-June, upright, twenty inches tall. Nine to ten old rose flowers; a good cut-flower or pot plant.

'Kimberly Ann'-Mid-season, outfacing. Dark red, carries secondary buds; up to forty flowers.

'Sally Jo Ann'-Mid-June, outfacing. Cardinal red with currant red reverse; colors show beautiful shadings.

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