

# SWEET SMELL *of success*

On a Welsh hillside, two dynamic women have started  
a business growing roses to make rose water ►

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Desdemona Freeman  
and Denise Jones work  
out in the countryside  
of the Welsh Borders.





*'It's been a massive learning curve... We've had to become experts in lots of different disciplines'*

**ABOVE** Several varieties of more than 100 roses grow at Desdemona's farm near Monmouth.

**BELOW RIGHT** The rose blooms must be harvested at sunrise to capture the optimum natural oils.

Sometimes inspiration strikes at unexpected times, and Desdemona Freeman's 'lightbulb moment' came at the school gates. 'I was talking to a mum who runs a skincare company called Nothing Nasty, and she was complaining about the price of organic rose oil,' she explains. 'I wasn't doing anything particular, just looking after my children, and it occurred to me that on our farm we have 17 acres of clay soil, which roses are said to do quite well on. In my innocence, I thought I might produce some rose oil.'

Desdemona was given six rose plants by her mother for her birthday, and started looking into rose oil production. 'That's when I discovered that you need an awful lot of roses to make rose oil,' she says, ruefully. Undeterred, she joined forces with a friend, Denise Jones, and set about planting more than 100 roses.

Over three years, while the new roses grew, Desdemona and Denise planted companion plants such as camomile and marigolds, which would help grow the roses without the use of chemicals. From these plants, they created







natural products such as a potpourri and herbal bath products, which gave them an income and meant they could save for the still they needed for rose oil production.

Once the plants had grown and the still was bought, Desdemona and Denise experimented with the distilling process. 'As it turns out, we still didn't have nearly enough roses to produce rose oil,' says Desdemona. 'But what we have achieved is a rose-oil-rich rose water, which we feel is fantastic in its own right.'

Rose water is generally a by-product of the rose oil industry, based largely in Iran, Iraq and Bulgaria, where the water can be distilled up to seven times to extract the maximum amount of oil. 'Our process makes sure the rose oil stays in the rose water,' she explains.

After lots of research and experimentation, the two women decided that in the UK, damask roses make the best rose water. The pair do grow other roses, including the apothecary rose, which was used for medicinal purposes in medieval times.

'Not every rose that is fragrant will grow in the UK, and not every fragrant rose will make rose water,' says Desdemona. 'The rose that we use has a cultivar name of 'Kazanlik', named after a town in Bulgaria where there is a famous valley of roses. They're very fragrant, but short-lived -

if you leave the blooms on the plant, they're over in a couple of days. And they're very prickly.'

Of course, the amount of prickles is an important factor when you're picking blooms by hand from more than 100 plants in summer. 'You pick on the day that the first bud bursts, and then you carry on picking every day,' explains Desdemona. 'You need to pick very early in the morning, as the sun burns off the essential oils.' ►

**ABOVE LEFT** They also grow lavender to make essential oils and bath products. **ABOVE RIGHT** The majority of the roses grown here are 'Kazanlik'. **BELOW LEFT** 'Hansa'. **BELOW RIGHT** *Rosa alba* 'Maxima'.







**LEFT** Desdemona empties bags of frozen rose blooms into the still to extract the rose water. Freezing after picking helps concentrate the fragrance. **BELOW LEFT** The company now produces about 1,000 bottles of rose water a year.

Once picked, the blooms are batch distilled in a traditional copper still, then matured in glass demijohns in a cool, dark barn. 'It's amazing - the rose water has a completely different scent when it's mature,' says Desdemona. The rose water is then decanted into bottles made of Miron glass, a type of violet glass produced in the Netherlands. It has more preservative qualities than blue, green or brown glass.

At the moment, Desdemona and Denise's company Petals of the Valley is producing around 1,000 small bottles of rose water a year. Rose water has been used for centuries for skincare, as a fragrance, as a linen freshener and for medicinal purposes, but their Welsh rose water is the only one being produced in the UK that is approved for food use and is preservative free. It was launched at the Abergavenny Food Festival last September, where people were introduced to the joys of adding rose water to summer and autumn fruits, drinks, compotes, cakes and desserts, as well as savoury dishes with lamb and chicken.

'It's been a massive learning curve,' says Desdemona. 'We've had to become experts in lots of different disciplines - creating websites, writing, becoming gardeners and marketeers. Little did I know when I had that idea at the school gates what the journey would be!'

**Petals of the Valley, Tregout Farm, Crossway, near Newcastle, Monmouth NP25 5NS. Tel: +44 (0)1600 750294. The farm will be open to the public on Sunday 7 June as part of Skenfrith Open Gardens, 10.30am-5pm. [www.petalsofthevalley.co.uk](http://www.petalsofthevalley.co.uk)**



## DESDEMONA & DENISE'S ROSE-GROWING TIPS

- **To get the roses off to the best possible start**, before planting we prepare the ground with well-rotted horse manure and sprinkle mycorrhizal fungi on the bare roots.
- **The roses are topped up annually** with more well-rotted horse manure, plus ground eggshells from the farm (rich in calcium and lime, both essential nutrients for rose growth), and the occasional banana skin (which releases potassium, calcium and magnesium) throughout the year.
- **We prune our roses** by cutting them back by up to two-thirds. We want them to grow to chest level by the time we pick them, because we don't want to get bad backs.
- **We are firm believers in companion planting.** The roses are underplanted with garlic to help keep aphids away; it is also believed to improve the intensity of the roses' scent. Marigolds and camomile are used to attract beneficial insects such as ladybirds and hoverflies, which eat the aphids.
- **If you pick the first few flowers** on the day the buds burst, you'll get more blooms.

