

ROSES

A wreath, blanket or garland, the floral arrangement for the Kentucky Derby winner has been called all of these since the first presentation in the 1890s. One story has it that following the 1883 running of the Kentucky Derby, roses were first presented to all the ladies attending a Louisville party given by fashionable New York socialite and gamester E. Berry Wall. The roses created such a sensation with the ladies that track president Col. M. Lewis Clark decided to feature the rose as the official flower for the 1884 Kentucky Derby.

Although the 1884 Derby may have been the start of the tradition, the first published account of roses draped on the winning horse came in 1896 when Ben Brush was presented with a collar of white and pink roses, tied with white and magenta ribbon. It's not clear whether the Louisville Jockey Club sanctioned the rose garland in these early runnings or if indeed they were always roses presented on Derby Day. One account has it that in 1898, the wife of John W. Schorr, owner of Lieber Karl, the 1-3 favorite, purchased the most expensive floral design in Louisville for their horse's victory. Plaudit, however, pulled the upset that day and won by a nose and the roses went to waste. Another report states the 1902 winner, Alan-a-Dale, was adorned with carnations and ferns.

Roses became the traditional way to honor the Derby winner during the early years of the 20th century. Dating back to 1906 Churchill Downs has photos of the winner with the garland.

In 1925, the late Bill Corum, a New York sports columnist, famously dubbed the classic race for 3-year-olds as the "Run for the Roses." Corum later served as president of Churchill Downs from 1950-58.

The first Garland of Roses was designed in 1932 by Louisville florist shop owner Grace Walker as commissioned at the request of Samuel Culbertson, an official at Churchill Downs. Previous to that time, the roses were often formed into a horseshoe that was then presented to the Derby winner. Walker designed and produced an intricate pattern using more than 500 of the darkest red roses and greenery stitched on a cloth-backed blanket. This design was first modeled by 1932 Derby winner Burgoo King. Mrs. Walker retired in 1974, but her daughter, Betty Korfhage, continued the practice until she sold the Kingsley Walker Florist in 1984.

Continuing a new tradition that started with Kentucky Derby 113 in 1987, "master designers" from the national grocery chain Kroger will meet in Louisville at 4 p.m. EDT on Kentucky Oaks Day (the day before the Derby) to begin the delicate task of creating the Garland of Roses at the Middletown Kroger store located at 12501 Shelbyville Rd. The entire 10 to 12-hour process is a public event as the crew continues to enhance the spectacular winner's tribute for all to see and appreciate. In past years, 6,000 people came to see the all-night event.

The Garland of Roses has come to symbolize the Kentucky Derby throughout the world. It is 122 inches long, 22 inches wide and weighs approximately 40 lbs. The lining is made of deep green moiré bengaline and features the great seal of the Commonwealth of Kentucky embroidered on one end and Churchill Downs' event mark on the other.

More than 400 "Freedom" roses are placed on the garland. Grown and cultivated for its impressive bloom size, stem length and lush foliage, longevity and classic rose shape, the "Freedom" rose – a perfect patriotic red – was named shortly after the events of September 11, 2001 in tribute to the victims, their families and the men and women serving in the armed forces to protect the freedom of our great nation.

The "Freedom" rose was chosen to replace the "Classy" rose in 2008. Several different roses have been used through the years. For example, Kroger used 554 Kentucky-grown "Royalty" roses in 1987. Mrs. Walker used the "Visa" rose from South America in the last few years she was alive. Many people came to believe that she used the American Beauty Rose, but that was never the case.

With today's "Freedom" rose, each stem is inserted into its own water vial hidden inside the garland backing, all carefully hand sewn into place, on a layer of thornless sprengeri. The roses are framed with an attractive hand-made border of boxwood, camellia and coffee leaves. To complete the design, custom-made ribbons are tied to fronds at each end and to the crown of roses at the center.

The final step in crafting the garland will be to place a crown of roses, greenery and ribbons at the center – one rose for each Thoroughbred running in the Kentucky Derby. A special rose will be placed in the center of the arrangement to symbolize the struggle and heart necessary to reach the Kentucky Derby Winner's Circle.

The winning horse will be adorned with the Garland of Roses – the most coveted possession in the world of horse racing – in the hollowed grounds of the Kentucky Derby Winner's Circle just minutes after the race. In addition, the Kentucky Derby-winning jockey will be presented with the Jockey's Bouquet, which is made of 60 matching long stem roses wrapped with 10 yards of ribbon.

At approximately 8:45 a.m. on the day of the Kentucky Derby, the Garland of Roses and Jockey's Bouquet will be transported to Churchill Downs with a police escort. The escort typically arrives at the track amid much fanfare at 10 a.m. and goes on public display until 12 p.m. with Kroger designers on hand to answer questions and speak with spectators. Following the public display, the roses are stored in a room inside the Paddock Runway until they are brought to the Kentucky Derby Winner's Circle at approximately 5:54 p.m.

The Kroger floral designers also are responsible for decorating the great urns in the Kentucky Derby Winner's Circle and Red Carpet celebrity entrance with roses – typically a total of 2,100 roses that aren't selected for the Garland of Roses. This usually occurs at dawn.

Greenery At A Glance

- 400 "Freedom" roses from Kroger's master floral designers are individually hand sewn to the winner's garland which is 2 ½ yards long, 14 inches wide and weighs 40 pounds
- 60 matching long-stemmed red roses, wrapped with 10 yards of ribbon, comprise the winning jockey's bouquet
- 2,100 roses dress the Kentucky Derby winner's circle
- 22,000 roses being grown in greenhouse
- 250 rose bushes around the facility
- 12,000 tulips planted
- 400 trees and shrubs