



# Heathers 12

*Yearbook of The Heather Society 2015*

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ISSN 0440-5757

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## Diary of propagating an unusual bell heather: *Erica cinerea* ‘Molly Rose’

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### The discovery

One Sunday afternoon in August (2013), I went on a walk with my dad across the heathland at Frensham Ponds, Surrey. I spotted a bell heather with pretty rose pink flowers, which looked different from the purple flowers covering the common at this time of year. I pointed it out to my dad, who told me it could possibly be a new variety, and that we should keep an eye on it to see if it really is new. Dad said that if it was different from any other varieties, he would register it and call it ‘Molly Rose’ after me, as I had found it, and because it was rose pink, like my middle name, Rose. I was so excited at the thought of producing a new heather and having it named after me. I badly wanted to take cuttings there and then, but Dad convinced me to wait a little longer. We went back to ‘Molly Rose’ several times that summer (2013), to remind ourselves where it was, as Frensham Ponds Common spreads over a vast area (400 hectares). It was definitely different from the others.

### Summer 2014

We went back to ‘Molly Rose’ in July to see how she was doing. She was definitely a rose pink flowerer, very pretty, but not coping well. Like all of the heather on the common, she was struggling because of the extremely hot, dry summer (the soil is very sandy: Bagshot Sand, Dad told me). We noticed that the shrubs of the common ling were suffering more than the bell heather. They were looking very brown, almost burnt. Dad looked at them closer. “Yes, as I suspected”, he said, “the dreaded heather beetle”, as he showed me a tiny olive-green and brown striped beetle. The ling weren’t only suffering from drought, they were being eaten alive! The good news for ‘Molly Rose’ was that heather beetles don’t eat bell heather, but the damage done to the others was still upsetting. We decided now was not a good time to be taking cuttings, and to keep an eye on her in the hope she would improve.

## Autumn 2014

After many visits it was on 21 September (2014) that ‘Molly Rose’ looked healthy enough to take cuttings. We also noticed that the ling was recovering from the heather-beetle damage, thanks to the regular rainfall. I had my plastic bag with me and some secateurs. I cut some material off her, mainly from around the lower edges where the new growth was best (Figure 1). As soon as I had a good amount Dad drove us back to the nursery, about ten minutes away. When we got there I prepared to make my new cuttings. I filled a 150-cell tray with compost, a nursery-mix of peat, slow-release fertilizer and *Trochoderma* (a friendly fungus, Dad told me), watered it in and then pricked holes in each cell. I sat down in the potting shed and started to make cuttings from the wood I’d collected. I selected the youngest growth, about 4cm long, pinched the tip out and stripped the leaves from the lower half, and put one in each cell. Luckily I had collected enough good material to fill the tray completely: 150 cuttings. It took me about an hour and a half. When I’d finished I wrote out a label with my name “Molly Rose” (Figure 2) and the date “21st September 2014” and put it in the tray.

That was the easy bit done. Now to get them rooted. I’d had some experience before as about six years ago, when I was 6, I did some cuttings of *Erica* × *stuartii* ‘Irish Lemon’ (my favourite) which I rooted, potted up and sold at a local flower show for £1 each. I raised £100 towards our school project which sponsored a village school in Uganda.

I put my finished tray of ‘Molly Rose’ cuttings into a small propagation tent I had made with my dad’s help. It was very simple; just wire hoops and canes



Figure 1. Molly taking the cuttings (photograph by John Hall).



Figure 2. The cuttings, labelled, ready to root.



Figure 3. Propagation tent.

with milky polythene draped over the top (Figure 3). I had put this in one of Dad's bigger polythene tunnels on the nursery, which had been white-washed for shade. I watered the tray using a watering can, with the rose turned down, to firm the cuttings in. I then put the cover back over the tent. Now all I had to do was wait and hope for roots to appear.

### The making of 'Molly Rose'

We don't live on the nursery so I rely on my dad to keep them watered when they needed it. I go down to the nursery each weekend as I have two chickens, a Warren called Betty and a Lavender bantam called Tallulah, and two Aylesbury ducks called Charlie and Lola, which I clean out and give fresh bedding. I also inspect my cuttings to see how they are doing, and check that Dad is looking after them for me. If they need a little water I give them a light splash with the watering can. I was tempted to pull out a cutting and check for root, but Dad said to leave them for at least a month before doing that, as the roots are so delicate that I could damage them, and to be patient (which is not very easy). The cuttings continued to look healthy so Dad must have been doing something right.

It is 28 October 2014 and I'm on the nursery to clean out my ducks and chickens, and Dad said it might be worth checking 'Molly Rose' for root. I went into the poly-tunnel and removed the cover from the propagation tent, took my tray of cuttings out and placed it on the table. I noticed that a few of the cuttings have a small amount of new growth on them, which is a good sign. I carefully pull the first one out and – Wow! lots of bright, white roots, and on my first one (Figure 4). A big smile spread across my face. I gently replace it back into its cell, lightly firming it in. I couldn't help pulling out another, not so good this time. I go for one more and it has great



Figure 4. A rooted cutting of 'Molly Rose'.

root, as do most of the others I gently pull out, being careful to return them. I'm so pleased with 'Molly Rose'.

I will continue checking on my cuttings at weekends, and when they have all rooted strongly enough, hopefully by early next spring (2015), I'll pot them up and grow them on to flower in the summer, for the very first time as *Erica cinerea* 'Molly Rose'.

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Editor's postscript. Molly, at the time of writing, is 12 years old, the youngest author to have contributed to The Heather Society's Yearbook (the previous holder of this "record" is now Professor Ian Small who, aged 13, contributed "First impressions" to *Yearbook* **2** (no. 5): 7–8. 1976).

*Erica cinerea* 'Molly Rose' was formally registered by John Hall on 3 November 2014: registration no. E.2014.03, and a certificate of registration was duly signed. The name is formally published here (see Supplement to the International register of heather names XV (p. 78, this issue).