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TREE PEONY

“The tree peony is yet rare in our gardens. It is too slow for us Americans, we must have something like a verbena, which can be had in full bloom and sells cheap.” Thus wrote that great New England gardener, Hovey, in 1864. He had been writing about these same plants in the American Gardeners’ Magazine and Register for 28 years with the hope of popularizing them; apparently he was getting discouraged.

Mr. B. M. Watson, who taught horticultural classes in the old Bussey Institute, used to tell his pupils that the tree peony was the most beautiful flower in the world. Yet he knew only a few of the older kinds. What could he have said had he lived to see the magnificent varieties of today!

The tree peony has been in cultivation in this country for nearly a century and a half. Collections of 25 or more named varieties were exhibited at flower shows at both Boston and Philadelphia 120 years ago, yet what Hovey wrote so long ago still remains true. Our gardening public flocks to the cheaper, quicker things.

The oldest and largest of the public collections in this country is at Highland Park in Rochester. John Dunbar brought named varieties from Japan in the early 90’s. The plants were grafted on wild *Paeonia suffruticosa* stock and did not long survive, but Dunbar saved the seeds and there are now some 5000 seedlings to be seen in the Rochester Parks. They have a fairly good color range, but most of them are not equal to the finest named varieties of the day.

The collection at Swarthmore College has fewer plants but has over 200 of the finest varieties. These plants are now 10 and 15 years old and give spectacular bloom each year.

The name “Tree” peony is unfortunate for the plants are quite dwarf shrubs. They grow ordinarily not more than 4 or 5 feet in height though occasional plants are to be seen up to 6 or even 7 feet. The term “Tree” has long been

used to distinguish them from the herbaceous peonies which die to the ground each winter. Commercial propagation nowadays is by grafting on herbaceous peony roots, which do not sucker to any extent, and which seem to support the new plant well, although not every one of the plants will eventually have the desirable trait of growing on their own roots.

Planting should be done in the autumn, preferably about the middle of October. They must be given a well-drained position; soil should be dug deep and have plenty of plant food. Occasional applications of ground limestone are beneficial in acid soil regions. Little pruning is necessary except to cut out old or weak stems. In some places the plants ought to be covered in winter with straw or burlap to prevent rabbits from eating the young shoots.

The color range of tree peonies is from pure white through pink, scarlet, crimson, purple, magenta and lilac pink. It is one of the most remarkable color ranges of any garden plant.

When the expression "tree peony" is used it ordinarily refers to varieties of *Paeonia suffruticosa*, the wild home of which was only discovered in western China quite recently although the tree peony had been an inhabitant of China's gardens for over 15 centuries. The wild plant is a single magenta purple and it has a white form with some purple flecks in it. The old Chinese gardeners loved heavy double forms and propagated these and it was varieties of this group which first came to western Europe in 1787 and to this country about 1800.

Many American gardeners do not care much for these heavy double forms which hang their flower heads down in the foliage. The color selections in this group also are not particularly pleasing to American tastes and of the more than 100 varieties of these that I have grown I have retained only very few, the best of them being "Reine Elizabeth," "Carolina d'Italie," "Souvenir de Ducher" and a few others.

The tree peony was taken from China to Japan by Buddhist monks in the 17th century. Japanese gardeners have developed single and semi-double varieties, which I very much prefer to the Chinese ones. They seem to be a little more finicky in their requirements than the Chinese kinds and perhaps for that reason are not so well known. I recommend them to all American gardeners, who are not in the class described by Mr. Hovey, and who are willing to pay a fair price for a plant that is expensive to produce and are willing to wait for it to develop properly.

Plants of named varieties of Japanese types are now available in a few American nurseries, the prices range anywhere from \$3 to \$10 apiece, depending on size, and this price, I believe, is a very reasonable one as the plant is increased slowly and with considerable difficulty.

It would seem to me best for most American gardeners to buy Japanese tree peonies from specialty growers and to give the order by color desired rather than by name, as the quantities of some of the named varieties are so small that

it is not always possible to get just the variety one wants. A list of all varieties in American commerce with cross reference to the nurseries which have them was published by the American Peony Society in September 1944.

All the peonies I have mentioned are commonly called moutan peonies, the name being derived from the old Chinese word for peony. There are coming into commerce now, however, hybrids between these moutan peonies and the more recently discovered species from southern China, *Paeonia lutea* and *Paeonia Delavayi*. These peonies, discovered by French missionaries in the 1880's were sent to Paris where they attracted the attention of Professsr Louis Henry of the Paris Museum of Natural History. He made crosses which resulted in a variety now quite well known among peony experts, "Souvenir de Maxine Cornu." It is a heavy double yellow with red and magenta markings and to me it looks much more like a dahlia than a peony and I do not care much for it. It has sold in this country in the past few years for as much as \$65 for a small plant just because it is so unique. The Lemoines took up this cross and produced quite a number of varieties both single and double, the best known of which are probably "La Lorraine," "Flambeau," "Surprise" and "Alice Harding." Now we are getting magnificent new hybrids in this group from Professor A. P. Saunders of Clinton, New York. His first introduction, "Argosy," is beginning to be quite well known in gardens. Among his newer varieties which are not yet widely distributed and which can be had in only very small quantities, there may be mentioned "Banquet," "Black Pirate," "Festival," "Roman Gold," "Siver Sails."

These hybrid peonies are very vigorous in our climate but may not be quite so hardy in the extreme North. They bloom in the Philadelphia region in the last of May which is about two weeks later than the moutan peonies which usually come in mid-May.

Tree peonies have been so little grown that relatively little is known either about their cultural requirements or their climatic adaptability. There are fine ones in Boston and other parts of New England, splendid ones in central and western New York and in New Jersey, eastern Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland down to Washington, D.C. They are probably not so hardy in the middle west although I have seen them in Chicago and there is quite a collection of them in the park in Milwaukee and an occasional report comes in of plants in Minnesota. They are thoroughly hardy to 20 degrees or so below zero and beyond that we do not know exactly what they will or will not stand.

I do not know how well they will do in the regions south of Washington, D.C. In general they seem to be more subject to spring frost injury in mild climates because it is their habit to start growth extremely early. In some of these milder climates they might begin their growth in January and then be ruined by February frosts. Each year when the buds come out in the spring I wonder if they will be nipped by frost but I have had good flowers from plants with quite large buds when the thermometer dropped as low as 28 in mid-April. Only once since

I have been growing tree peonies has the entire crop been ruined and that year practically all spring flowers including lilacs were caught.

The Japanese, who have developed so many beautiful varieties, evidently feed their plants quite heavily. I have been rather afraid to do that here on the theory that the quick growth would be soft and more subject to disease. The only serious trouble I have had with my plants has been botrytis. It seems to be worst in seasons with alternating hot and cold weather when whole branches will suddenly wilt and die overnight. These branches should be pruned off well below the affected part and burned to prevent the spread of the fungus. It is said that the regular spraying with Bordeaux mixture will prevent this trouble but my experience is too limited from which to draw conclusions.

I allow the seed to ripen each year so that I can plant seed as this is a fascinating experiment to see if superior new forms can be obtained. I find that many of my seedlings have poor colors and hence they are discarded but occasional good whites and pinks and reds turn up and they are much appreciated. Commercial propagation is by grafting on the roots of the herbaceous *Paeonia albiflora* in August. Experiments are under way in suggesting new methods. One of these is storage of grafts in warm vapor to hasten the callous. The Boyce Thompson Institute has done some work on tree peony seeds in reference to temperature for after-ripening and work has been done at Cornell on embryo culture. All these are still in the experimental stage but may make propagation methods more certain in the future. As far as I have record no one has been able to root cuttings to any great extent. Occasional reports come in of successful layering.

For more detailed accounts of the tree peony I would refer the reader to the manual of the American Peony Society published in 1928 and to the bulletins of the American Peony Society, particularly the September 1944 number.

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* Editor's Note: We are greatly pleased that Mr. Wister wrote this article for *Arnoldia*. He has been growing tree peonies for many years and so is well qualified to give us information about them.