

# The Evolution of My Peony Gardens

by Eleanor Tickner

*I* CULTIVATE HUNDREDS OF PEONIES as a hobby in Gradyville, PA. Planted originally with an eye toward selling cut flowers, I soon realized that my garden reflected the gardens that I had grown up with rather than what was being promoted in catalogs and magazines.

The garden contained varieties that have been on the market for decades. These varieties make great cut flowers and some have knock-your-socks-off fragrance, but all are poor landscape specimens as their generous-sized blooms tend to kiss the ground with the first rainfall. Armed with this insight, I set about adding cultivars with strong stems that require no mechanical support, as well as varieties with coral- and yellow-colored flowers. However, even with the addition of the herbaceous peonies ‘Coral Sunset’, ‘Pink Hawaiian Coral’, ‘Bartzella’, and ‘Garden Treasure’, the dreamer in me was not satisfied.

## **More, More, More**

I still wanted more, and yet I didn’t know what more was. It wasn’t until my garden contained a dozen or so tree peonies, one of which was an early blooming species tree peony, that I realized what I wanted was peony blooms for a longer period of time.

## **The Peony Bloom Time Project**

About the same time, I heard a lecture illustrating Michael Denny’s

program, ‘The Peony Bloom Time Project’. Gardeners from throughout North America and Denny himself documented the bloom date of the first fully opened flower of every species and cultivar that they observed. Denny, a professor of economics at the University of Toronto, then tabulated the findings and produced a chart showing that the peony bloom sequence extended for seven weeks. However 85% of the peony varieties, mostly *Paeonia lactiflora*, bloom in weeks four, five, and six. (A detailed explanation of Denny’s database can be found at [www.bloomdate.paeonia.com](http://www.bloomdate.paeonia.com).)



*Paeonia* ‘Coral Scout’

## **Extending the Bloom Time**

After I scanned his data, I realized that most of my peonies bloomed in that same three-week period. I concluded that I needed to purchase and cultivate some of the thirty-five listed species and hybrid peonies that bloom in weeks two and three. It would be a bonus if I could add any of the twenty or so peonies listed as week-one bloomers

and successfully grow them to bloom. The cultivars that bloom in week seven are not consistently successful in opening to full bloom stage due to the unwelcome arrival in our area of 90° temperatures in late May and early June. Realistically, those week-seven bloomers are not worth my garden real estate since the cut flower yield is inconsistent.

## **Early Bloomers**

The aforementioned early blooming tree peony, *Paeonia ostii*, is sold in the USA as ‘Fen(g) Dan Bai’. My five-year-old plant is about 3’ tall and wide with abundant, luscious, white single flowers and requires little more than sun and good drainage. Afternoon shade is not necessary this early in the season as the April sun is lacking extreme warmth. Need I mention here that a tree peony is in reality a multi-stemmed shrub and not a tree at all?

My second species acquisition was the week-one, lipstick-red, single-flowered, *Paeonia tenuifolia*, commonly sold as the fern-leaf peony. I thought that the original site drainage was sufficient, but did not allow for full sun, consequently, the plants struggled, then succumbed after two seasons. The second purchase was planted in an area that received good sun with only fair drainage. Surprisingly, the roots survived and multiplied although the amount of blooms was minimal. So this fall, I replanted them in a garden area

photo ©Eleanor Tickner



photo ©Eleanor Tickner

*Paeonia tenuifolia*

with full sun and excellent drainage. Lesson learned!

Another welcome addition to my garden was a gift of red double-flowered, fern-leaf peony roots. The donor stated that he had been told that this week-two bloomer was very rare and quite expensive. With research, I determined that the peony gift was indeed costly to purchase even at today's prices and, though not rare, not locally available. Officially listed as *Paeonia tenuifolia* 'Rubra Flora Plena', the roots, unlike the frequently pictured *P. lactiflora* roots, resemble large breakfast sausages. YUM! This species, like the single red fern-leaf, needs full sun and excellent drainage to flourish. It is reported to be the peony that our ancestors carried West in the covered wagons, now said to be seen in many Midwest cemeteries.



photo ©Eleanor Tickner

*Paeonia obovata*

I unwittingly acquired another one of the three double-flowered species peonies when I purchased a potted plant tagged the 'Memorial Day' peony. Listed in catalogs as *Paeonia officinalis* 'Rosa Plena', this week-three bloomer has leafstalks which have an ungainly spreading habit resulting in twisted lax stems, but the pink-colored flowers bloom when few others exist in the garden. Cultivation is less demanding than the above mentioned fern-leaf peonies, as it grows under the same

conditions as the common garden peony. *P. officinalis*, sometimes referred to as the European peony, has been cultivated for medicinal purposes in homeopathic remedies for more than five hundred years. According to Halda and Waddick, *P. officinalis* is still found wild in Europe.<sup>1</sup> The third double-flowered species peony is *Paeonia officinalis* 'Rubra Plena', the red-flowered version of the Memorial Day peony.

In 2007, a tray of *Paeonia obovata* seedlings was given to me to sell at the September Scott Arboretum plant sale. As it is rather difficult to attract purchasers with a pot of soil and no plant stem in sight, a number of these seedlings made their way into my garden. These week-two plants reside under a redbud tree, enjoying



photo ©Eleanor Tickner

*Paeonia* 'Chalice'

the dappled shade. In 2010 the first single white flowers appeared but were fleeting at best. Literature tells me that the individual plants will eventually develop into clusters. More impressive and

visually attractive are the colorful seedpods that develop over the summer.

The tree peonies *Paeonia rockii* and *P. rockii* subsp. *linyanshani* (week-three) have recently been added to the gardens. Native to the mountains of western China, *P. rockii* is recognized for its resistance to cold and drought and is well suited to our area. Rockii tree peonies exhibit a wide range of colors from pure white to pale pink. My rockii has pale pink petals with

<sup>1</sup> Halda, Josef J.; Waddick, James W. *The Genus Paeonia*. (2004) Timber Press. ISBN 9780881926125.

maroon flares or interior spots; while my linyanshani has a pure white flower with dark flares. Rockii peonies are reported to produce fragrant flowers, but I cannot verify that presently, as my plants are immature. While these young plants are rather short and stocky now, I anticipate a full-grown plant to reach a height and width of 5'.

With little effort and few site restrictions, I have had much better

results growing A. P. Saunders' early blooming hybrids, such as 'Chalice' (week-two), 'Roselette' (week-three), 'Audrey' (week-one), and 'Athena' (week-two), as well as 'Roy Pehrson's Best Yellow' (week-

three). In 2010, with unusually high temperatures in April, many of these peony flowers opened in early May, well outside Michael Denny's reported bloom weeks. My love affair with these early cultivars is due to their pale and sometimes opalescent coloring, as well as the large attractive leaves from their *Paeonia macrophylla* parent. I have divided and replanted the original roots with great success, as these hybrids welcome a full sun site.

### The Dreaded Frost

What I haven't mentioned is what many consider the downside of early blooming peonies, the dreaded late frosts. I have been recording garden events for several years and my zone 6



photo ©Eleanor Tickner

Frost Damage

garden has only experienced a light frost when the early hybrids are just beginning to open. The only frost damage that I have observed was to the stamens of the partially or the fully opened flowers. The stamen tips turned black as shown in an accompanying photo. I have read that a heavy frost will cause the stem to bend over as if the bud was a heavy burden. That peony grower goes on to say that the sun's warming rays will induce the stem to straighten by noon. The bud will open and flower normally if the freeze/thaw event is not a frequently repeated occurrence. I have not viewed this described event, and hopefully never will, even though the possibility exists for my week-one bloomers.

### Is It All Worth It?

Are the efforts to extend the peony blooming season worth a gardener's time and energy? I wholeheartedly say yes. The lure of having peony blooms for a minimum of five weeks is reason enough for me to focus my efforts on finding additional sources for, and trying to grow, these early flowering plants. To read more about these stunning flowers, peruse Allan Rogers' book, *Peonies*.



photo ©Eleanor Tickner

Attractive Seedpod Starting to Open

### Want to Know More?

I invite you to attend the spring lecture "Unusual Herbaceous Perennials and Species Peonies" at the Scott Arboretum in the Wister Greenhouse on Saturday, April 16, 2011. Jeff Jabco, Coordinator of Horticulture; Chuck Hinkle, Garden Supervisor; and I will be the presenters. At that time, I will display pictures from my 2010 garden of awesome peony blossoms and noteworthy plant foliage. You can then plan a visit or two to my gardens and judge for yourself which species and early blooming peonies need to be included in your garden's future. Depending on availability, some of those included in the lecture may be for sale that day.



photo ©Eleanor Tickner

Fully Open *Paconia obovata* Seedpod

### Peonies for Sale

The Mid-Atlantic Peony Society will staff a booth at the Scott Arboretum Associates Plant Sale on Saturday and Sunday, September 17-18, 2011. Peonies will be available for purchase at the April lecture and the September plant sale.



*Eleanor Tickner* is a member of the Board of Directors for the American Peony Society, [www.americanpeonysociety.org](http://www.americanpeonysociety.org); cofounder and president of the Mid-Atlantic Peony Society, [www.midatlanticpeony.org](http://www.midatlanticpeony.org); and owner of A Peony Garden, [www.etflowers.com](http://www.etflowers.com), in Glen Mills, PA.

Ed Note: For a full-color version of this article, go to the HPS/MAG web site, [www.hardyplant.org](http://www.hardyplant.org).

# Where is Spring?

President's Message by *Janice Thomas*

*A*H, SPRING! YES, SPRING IS JUST AROUND THE CORNER and we can finally get into our gardens once again.

Spring is the time to visit nurseries, looking for that plant we read about over the winter, or saw in a catalog, and just must have. We all had ample time, while the snow was falling, to pore over the nursery catalogs and envision what we wanted to do with our gardens this

year, or how they will look this summer. Some of us spent time working at the **Seed Exchange Program**, chatting with fellow gardeners about this and that of gardening.

To get us even more in the mood is the upcoming **Philadelphia Flower Show**. There you feel like you have been lifted into a different country—until you walk out the door and realize it is still winter. But you know it's not too much longer before spring will arrive.

Yet another sign that spring is coming is our **March Into Spring** program at the Delaware County Community College on March 19. It is not too late to sign up; you can download information from our web site, [www.hardyplant.org](http://www.hardyplant.org). The speakers

this year are excellent; they will help you get ready for that big day when you can finally open your garden-shed door.

Once you are in your gardens working, you will need a one-day break and we are providing you with one this spring. On May 18, we are offering a one-day trip to the **New York Botanical Garden** and **Wave Hill** (more information on page 6).

Throughout the gardening season, we will provide you with more opportunities to take a break from your gardening chores, meet fellow gardeners, and see what they are doing or planning for their gardens. In the meantime, get those tools ready. Soon the robins will be back and so will we.

Happy Gardening to you all.

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