

Tree Peonies – Sheer Extravagance!

Having been told that peonies must be planted in the fall, I have been surprised to see them in so many spring catalogs. However, there are peonies and peonies! The ones your grandmother had are herbaceous peonies, *Paeonia officinalis* or *P. lactiflora*, syn. *P. albiflora* and *P. japonica* and indeed they should be planted in fall.

These are so long lived they may be seen along country lanes where the paths they once framed are derelict and overgrown. Finding their bright red pointed beginnings under piles of blown leaves is one of spring's neatest discoveries. Common peonies prefer cool springs and fade rapidly in the heat but by planting early bloomers, such as the deep red single 'Kansas' with its boss of golden stamens you can enjoy them before hot weather. Other early bloomers are 'America' a single deep crimson with slightly frilled petals, 'Ann Berry Cousins' semi-double salmon, and a delicious double deep pink with a silver sheen 'Mons. Jules Elie'.

Peonies will sulk if you move them, which I've had to do as their once sunny spot became shaded by rampantly growing neighbors---bad family planning. There are 30 or more species of these clump-forming herbaceous perennials with glorious fat blooms, handsome foliage and tuberous roots and a few must be in every garden!

The tree peony is not clump-forming but an upright to spreading, sparsely branched deciduous shrub. Right now, in the cold of February, tree peonies have clusters of incipient leaves on awkward dark branches, emerging from the axis between the main branches and last spring's dead stems. These rosy tan leaves have lime green at their base, an exciting promise of the beauty to come.

There are various species, *P. lutea* x *P. suffruticosa*, *P. x lemoinei*, *p. delavayi* and now these, in various tangles of the family tree, have been combined with the common *P. officinalis* to create peonies with the best of both species, the magnificent blooms of the tree peonies on a plant with the charm of the old fashioned heavily foliated common peony. Many nurseries are offering Itoh hybrids for spring planting.

One in the Jackson & Perkins catalog called 'Kopper Kettle' has huge 8" blooms that combine gold, orange, and red. It may rebloom and is hardy in zones 3-8. We note the zone 8 so it may be more heat tolerant than the herbaceous peonies. Another Itoh hybrid is 'Cora Louise' a large and lovely pale pink single. I notice that these Itoh hybrids can be less expensive than the straight tree peonies but prices vary: some cultivars are truly just for the connoisseur. The beauty and expense of many plants makes a persuasive argument for the existence of botanical gardens. Most of us do not want to own them; we just want to walk about and admire them.

All peonies need a sunny spot in deep, fertile, humus-rich, moist but well-drained close to neutral soil. Those are words right out of the plant encyclopedia and describe the Garden of Eden. We Tidewater sinners just have to do the best we can. Because planting too deeply prevents herbaceous peonies from blooming, I would tend to err on the high side in planting these new ones.

Most of us have had the experience of plopping a new plant atop the ground until we had time for a hole only to find when the time came to put it into the ground, that neglected plant had happily sent out roots from its perch and was doing very well thank you!

Although both herbaceous and tree peonies are blessed with lovely blooms, the herbaceous peonies are beautiful plants when not in flower. The enthusiasm with which the Itoh hybrids have been welcomed may be explained by their handsomeness as a plant.

The older tree peony shape defines shapeless, but I could be coaxed into buying the new hybrids if I had a spot that demanded one?