

PROF. SAUNDERS ON GROWING PEONIES.

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A lecture from A.P. Saunders, legendary peony hybridizer, in 1924 on the growing of peonies. The text is from one of the nearly abandoned yahoo peony groups, but unfortunately there is no exact reference to where it comes from. If you would know, I'd gladly update the article to include it.

Growing of Peonies

I feel an unaccustomed accession of modesty when I speak before an audience like this, and I feel as if the knowledge that I have been able to accumulate regarding Peonies during the last 25 years is probably not as large as many of you would accumulate in one or two seasons; but such as it is, I modestly lay it at your feet. In order that we may leave nothing obscure in the general message which I wish to bring to you, I should like first of all to say something about the various kinds of Peonies which are in cultivation in our gardens - your garden and mine - mine, anyway.

The Peony as we ordinarily understand the word and use it, is the Peony staged upstairs this afternoon. What is that plant? All those forms which we see staged in the great exhibition which is going on upstairs are derivatives of a species which appeared wild in China, called by botanists *Paeonia albiflora*, white flowered, or *Paeonia sinensis*, the Chinese Peony . Out of that flower have been developed all the immense variety of flowers which we now call Chinese Peonies. When we speak of the Chinese Peony we mean those staged upstairs, those which bloom from the 10th of June until the 4th of July in a normal season, in this latitude.

Chinese Herbaceous Peonies

All these Peonies before me on the table are, of course, of that kind, and I brought them because I want later on to say something about the different types of blooms which have been developed from *Paeonia sinensis*. I wanted also to say something about other groups, other species which have been found particularly amenable to cultivation. This seems to be true, that among the many wild species of plants which nature has offered us to work on if we will, a few are particularly susceptible to improvement, and those have yielded to us our wonderful garden flowers, either by the growing of seedlings and selecting the best types, or by cross fertilization of one species on another. You cannot be sure if you start on a wild species and cultivate it diligently that it will develop such beautiful forms as have been developed in this Peony. You find the same thing in the animal kingdom, man trying to domesticate animals from the remotest time until now. And how many has he been able to domesticate? Very few. The dog, the cat, the horse, the cow and chickens. Few

others. Multitudes of animals have been worked on - bear cubs, lion cubs - but usually there has been more fun for the lion than the man in the end if it is kept up long enough.

So we find that a great many species of plants will not lend themselves particularly to improvement under man's hand.

How far back does the Peony go? Let us trace its history. In the hall is a magnificent display of Peonies. Where did most of them come from? Some varieties were originated by American growers.

But long before Americans began the work, the French were at work raising seedlings and selecting the best. Where did the French get their Peonies? In 1805-6 they were first brought over from China and introduced to European gardens, and enthusiasts there immediately started in to raise seedlings and to improve upon the varieties which had come over from China. From France and Belgium enthusiasm spread to England and the work began there, and in America later on the same process was taken up.

Boston has the credit of being the center at which the whole of this phase of Peony culture in America started. Its serious performance began here through John Richardson, who lived in Dorchester. As to what sort of a man he was I cannot give you any idea, but he was a professor at Harvard - no doubt a good man. But he was far more than that. He was an expert. He had the divine gift of penetration. Somehow he knew whereabouts to select his seed and what plants to use for cross fertilization in order to produce a marvellous type of progeny. John Richardson had only a small garden. It could by no means be called a nursery. His little garden most Peony growers would consider insignificant. He did not even have the best Peonies, but a very modest collection, and yet today Peony men try and generally try in vain to produce varieties as good as the best John Richardson produced. If you are interested in knowing the particular varieties of Richardson's which I have in mind when I speak so highly of him, I mention to you before any others Walter Faxon, and for a particular reason; then Milton Hill, and Grandiflora; and then stop. A man who has made three Peonies as good as those may very well rest on his laurels. Walter Faxon I mention first of all for this reason. It has always been easy to grow beautiful white Peonies - Peonies that are white or pale flesh colored. In modern times we get such things as this in my hand - very pretty flesh colored things - hundreds of them. We get also fine dark reds and mahogany reds. But in the full pinks, darker than this but somewhat in the color of this we have very little among the double Peonies that is satisfactory to us. The full pink Peonies are apt to run too much into purplish reds, into disagreeable purples, into muddy and disgusting magentas, and those things have short shrift in my patch and equally short shrift in the gardens of others who raise Peonies. If I buy Peonies and find that they have this color, they go into the large dump which I keep for the Ishmaels. Now Walter Faxon is a full pink, of a fine glowing salmon shade and is therefore a peculiarly precious sort. It is in fact quite unique.

John Richardson died in 1887, at a very ripe old age. There is a moral I have pointed out before which

I will point out again here. Life is after all very interesting. There are none of us who like to be done with it when the time comes, and means of prolonging life have been sought by alchemists and many others from ancient times. At last I have discovered one. The art of prolonging life is to raise Peonies from seed. Yes! Because it is the will to live that fails us in the end. When we get old, our interests in life become weaker, and eventually fail altogether, and we have done with it. But if a patch of seedling Peonies is coming into bloom in June and the thought should come to us that our life had lasted long enough and perhaps it was time for the end, we should surely say: "Postpone it until the first of July so that I can see my Peonies bloom."



Prolonging life...

John Richardson lived to the advanced age of 89, I think. Almost all the men who have grown Peonies from seed have lived to be at least 85. That is one reason why I took it up. I wanted 30 years more of Peony culture, and could see no way more certain to give it to me than that. I recommend it to you all. Most of you don't need it. You don't have to think of the advancing years; but to the few, my contemporaries, I recommend this as the means of warding off the devastating effects of increasing years; for if you save Peony seed this year, put it into the ground this autumn, you have the pleasure of busying yourself with other pursuits until the spring of 1926. Peony seed germinates usually the second spring after planting. People, of course, may affect to marvel at anyone wanting to plant seed which takes two years to germinate. They think we put a chair down and watch the bed to see it shoot up. But no, we put the Peony seed into the ground and go about our business. All have business, such as it is. In the course of a year and a half, the Peonies come up, and when they come up you rejoice in them.

For they are the dearest things! Little tiny shoots of red, one leaf or perhaps two, a little bit bigger than my thumb nail.

The remarkable thing is to look at the plants and reflect on what is in them. You marvel how such tiny creatures can contain in them the possibility of producing such lovely blooms, and no two alike. They are already persons in the true sense. You watch their development just as you watch the development of your other children, and like other children they sometimes turn out better and sometimes not so well. When your Peony children turn out badly, you root them out and throw them away.

Chinese Tree Peonies

Another great group of Peonies are those called, in derision, I sometimes think, Tree Peonies. The name, Tree Peony, suggests straining the neck to look at it. You do strain the neck, but you strain it looking down, not up. They grow three feet high with me, but it is true in England they grow six or eight feet high.

The Tree Peony is a development from a totally different kind than the Chinese Peony because it makes a permanent woody growth. These Chinese Peonies are what is called herbaceous in habit. They have a complicated system of big roots under ground. Each year the foliage dies down and nothing is visible whatever. Buds form upon the crowns underground which next spring shoot up through the soil and become the flowering branches of that year. Tree Peonies, *P. moutan* or *arborea*, make permanent woody growth above ground, and form flower buds for next year in the axils of this year's leaves. These are forming now to make new branches next year and next year's flowers. This plant has been cultivated by the Chinese for many centuries and is one of their favorite plants. You hear more about Tree Peonies in China than you do about the herbaceous Peonies, probably because the Chinese consider the Tree Peony superior to the herbaceous, and in that judgment I most heartily concur. The herbaceous Peonies have not the subtle delicacy of the Chinese Tree Peonies, have not the astonishing range of color and the wonderful pinks. Those pinks in the Tree Peonies are of the most enchanting beauty, incredible. They also have whites, dark reds and flesh colors in just as rich variety as you need.

Tree Peonies have been the favorite motive for Chinese painters and porcelain workers from remote antiquity. Vase painters and porcelain workers from remote antiquity. Vases many centuries old have Peonies on them - very highly cultivated garden forms, showing that the plant had been in cultivation for a very long time. No one can guess when the Chinese began the cultivation of these Peonies. Probably back to the beginning of the Christian era or before. The group of Chinese Tree Peonies is a marvelous group of plants and nobody should profess to be a Peony fancier and not make a tremendous effort to have Tree Peonies in his garden. The effort is often disproportionate to the results with these plants. With the herbaceous type you order roots or sow seeds and put them in the ground, and you need give them scarcely a thought for fifteen or twenty years. But with the Tree Peonies you must think of them day and night, because they are liable to attacks of strange

maladies, and have one particularly annoying trick. In the morning you go out and look at a plant full of buds and think how fine it is. In the evening you go to look at it again and find that the plant is entirely withered and dead. This happens, it is true, only once in a while, but once is more than enough if it is a beautiful and valuable plant.

With these Chinese Peonies of the herbaceous type the buds form upon the crowns of the plants. In order to multiply those plants they need only be dug up and have the crown cut into sections, and every section that carries roots and a bud will be a new plant. It will soon shoot up and establish itself. But what are you going to do with the Tree Peony? How will you multiply it? If you slit the stem in two and make two plants, both will die. You will reduce your stock from one to zero. There is apparently no way but grafting. The Japanese have grafted Tree Peonies, taking parts of the branches at the right season, which is August, and grafting them into other Tree Peony roots. Unfortunately they use as stock a type of Tree Peony which is objectionable, with flowers as large as a man's hat, and the most glaring shade of magenta purple ever invented. The moment they come into bloom they have to be dug out and thrown away. That is the stock on which the Japanese graft. That stock sends up suckers, and if you graft a delicate and beautiful variety on a plant which forms vulgar and vigorous suckers, the little scion will be crowded out and die. The way to prevent this is to cut out the suckers, but how can you tell? You can't always be quite sure which is the stock and which the graft. The result is you are left in doubt, and you are indeed the man who hesitates and is lost, because if you leave the suckers they will soon crowd out the graft and kill it.

The European growers, on the other hand, have grafted the Tree Peonies on to the roots of the herbaceous Peonies - which does very well in some varieties and very poorly in others. Some bloom luxuriantly; others do not bloom for years.

In the old days, before the existence of Quarantine 37, all we need to do to get Tree Peony plants was to write an order to France or England; or order from our own nurseryman who in turn sent the order abroad. Under present restrictions no Tree Peonies can be imported for sale from abroad, and there are almost none for sale in America. I know of, I think, only one place in America where Tree Peonies are offered for sale. Mr. Farr, of Wyoming, has some plants; not many. What are we going to do about it? You say, "Why does he tell us about Tree Peonies and say they are so beautiful and then not tell us how we can get them?" I can tell you. It's a long process, requiring determination and devotion; but the only sound method is to grow them yourself from seed. There will be no trouble from grafts or shoots from the stock if you have Peony seedlings. They are your own and they are permanent, very healthy, and will bloom regularly.

I used to be asked: "Yes, but what guarantee have you that your seedlings will be of sufficiently good quality to be satisfactory?" I had to wait for the answer to that until they bloomed. I have had from fifty to sixty in full bloom this year, some with fifteen or eighteen flowers apiece. They are as good on the average as the stock we used to buy, either in Japan or Europe.

I suppose you have some curiosity as to where you can get your seed. Well, there is no seed to be had, either, in America. Neither plants nor seed.

I can suggest only one thing. That is that you come to me for it. I have 100 Tree Peony plants that have bloomed for me this year. Most will set seed, and I shall probably have 1000 or more seeds. Those who want to try a few need only give me your names. In the autumn I will send you small packages, according to the size of the crop and the number of requests.

You may not have much success in growing them. But if you do have patience and determination to grow Tree Peonies from seed or in any other way, you will never regret it. The flowers are of incomparable beauty.

Early Americans Grew *Officinalis* Peonies

There are two more groups that I should like to speak to you about though very briefly. Both species which I have spoken of are Chinese plants. Now there is a species native to Europe, *P. officinalis*, the Peony of the apothecary. From ancient records the Peony was esteemed a remedy for certain diseases, being considered to have some kind of medicinal properties. *P. officinalis*, the crimson native species of Europe marks by its name the use which was made of it. Out of that wild species have been developed a number of garden forms, 15 or 20 perhaps, among which the old double crimson Peony is the common one, and perhaps the best known of all Peonies. It is exceedingly common in New York, but is not quite so widely disseminated in Massachusetts; but is a very pretty plant. That group, the *Officinalis* group, also blooms earlier, and normally they are all over before the Chinese group begins. Now it may seem to you that this talk is rambling, but I am really keeping my thought pretty close to one theme. I am trying to answer the reproach that is cast upon the Peony very often, that it has too short a season. Well, the Chinese Peony has a short season. It has a season of about three weeks, and we see no way of extending that season except by cold storage, which prolongs it into midsummer, but that is of no use to the grower; only to the cut flower man. The way to extend the Peony season is by using first of all in the Chinese Peonies themselves both the very early varieties and the very late varieties, and then taking on the Tree Peonies and the *Officinalis* varieties with those, and then another group still, which comes before the Tree Peonies; and then you will be able to get a Peony season about six weeks long every year.

If you get as enthusiastic over the Peony as the so-called Peony fan so that you are considered more or less demented - you may even be glad when the season is over. When you wake up every morning dozens of new things are in bloom. You drag your friends out to see them - very reluctantly, as a rule; otherwise they would have gardens of their own. You drag them out, and that is a fatiguing process for you as well as for them. You compare your Peonies with those which you see at the shows, as to name, color, etc. - in short you are so busy with your Peonies from morning till night that you will conclude six weeks is just about the right time for the Peony season; and I am showing how you can have this season of Peonies.

The Chinese Peonies for three weeks, and for two weeks preceding them the Tree Peonies and Officinalis varieties. The Officinalis varieties have not been nearly as much developed as they should be. Very little work has been done with them. There are double crimson, double pink, double white, mauve pink and single crimson. But there is not the variety of color that there ought to be. There is a field for Peony enthusiasts, to produce new forms of Officinalis.

For the future - New Source Material for Peony Breeding

Then there is a new group which has just come into our gardens in recent years, which is exceedingly precious. There are but few varieties, but these are of the highest beauty. They are derived from a species of Peony discovered in the Caucasus, called *P. Wittmanniana*. That species has been used as the pollen parent by the great hybridizer Lemoine of Nancy. He has taken pollen from *Wittmanniana*, crossing that very early species with later flowering sorts, and has produced a race of hybrids very much like the male parent, but the species *Wittmanniana* is white and the crossing with the Chinese blood has given us progeny which vary in color. The best of these sorts, in my opinion, are *Mai Fleuri* and *Le Printemps*, and they are of very great beauty. I never fully appreciated them until this year. Something in the slow, cool, moist season this spring has enabled the *Wittmanniana* hybrids to develop to a degree of perfection never before equaled. During a few days, for they have a very short season, they were as lovely as anything I ever had in my garden. The flowers are single, and the colors are indescribable, being very much mixed. The petals have stripes of pink on a background of pale coffee color, - very weak coffee color. Imagine a white peony dipped in coffee, and then stained green and yellow, and then painted rose near the edges. These are extraordinary plants and have come to stay. They bloom normally from the 20th to the 25th of May. That is three weeks before the Chinese Peonies begin. They are very precious to us indeed, and I am sure that they are going to be further developed.

I hoped indeed that I might have something interesting to say about a number of such hybrids which bloomed for the first time with me this year. I had about two dozen *Wittmanniana* and *sinensis* crosses in bloom. A great many go back completely into the male parent and show no trace whatever of having been crossed. That seems very curious, when you take pollen from this species and put it on as different a species as the Chinese Peony, and then take seed from the Chinese plant and find that the seedlings have the leafage and character and bloom and color, all the beauty of the male parent. The mother plant is completely submerged. The characters of the male parent are dominant in the first generation. The characters of the female parent completely disappear. Save seed from the hybrids and in that progeny you are bound to get sports partly towards the male and partly towards Chinese Peonies. There is only one flaw in this. These hybrids do not set seed. I have 25 or 30 varieties, and all have pods. The pod swells up as if it were full of seed and I think: "This time I have got some." Later on in the summer the pods burst, and they are empty. These are some of the strange mysteries in connection with cross fertilization in plants, mysteries over which one may ponder much and go forward not at all.

There is a curious story in connection with the next group of which I wish to speak. In 1883 a French priest traveling in the mountains of southwestern China discovered a plant which looked as though it had the character of a Peony. He sent seeds home to Paris where they were planted. It grew to be a Peony indeed and was found to be a bright yellow flowered species. This was named *P. lutea*; the bloom is two inches across and as bright yellow as a buttercup, with delicious fragrance more like a lily - sweet and very agreeable. Now *Lutea* is a shrubby Peony, like the Chinese Tree Peonies, and Lemoine has made crosses between *Lutea* and Tree Peonies, and has introduced into commerce some two or three varieties which are large double yellow Peonies - big as these blooms before me and bright yellow, magnificent and extraordinary looking things. You would say somebody had dyed them. There is no need, because they come that way naturally.

This cross of the yellow Peony with the Chinese Tree Peony is a cross easily made, and you are likely to get occasionally a well developed seed. When I first began to make that cross I was sure I was going to be successful. I crossed from the Chinese Peony on to the *Lutea* plant, and the pods grew bigger and bigger throughout the summer. Evidently they were filled with seed. But in the autumn when I pressed one of these big seeds in my fingers it burst, and there was nothing in it. The problem which has always interested me is, what is the nature of that act of fertilization; for a Peony bloom that is unfertilized does not develop seed pods, but these pods grow all summer and are filled with enormous glistening black seeds, and those seeds are nothing but a covering. They have no contents. I should like to know what the process is which leads to the development of everything except the individual - all the appurtenances but not the person.

I have mentioned the Chinese Peony as constituting the backbone of Peony culture, and since I have a few minutes more, I should like to say a few words regarding the various types of bloom that have been worked out in this particular group.

First the true singles. These consist typically of a single row of petals surrounding a cluster of pollen-bearing stamens with the stigma in the center. These are easily identified, for if you will rub the finger gently over the stamens you will find it liberally powdered over with the yellow pollen.

Similar to the singles in appearance are the so-called Japanese type. In these flowers the stamens have really been transformed into stamen-like petals. These petals often have thickened yellow ends very much like the anthers on the end of the stamens in the single type; but if you will rub your finger over these you will rarely get the slightest trace of pollen. The thickened yellow edges really do contain pollen, but they very rarely burst so as to shed the pollen. However, if you want some pollen from flowers of the Japanese type, it can easily be had by slitting open one of these swelled edges with a knife blade, and scraping off some of the pollen which will be found inside.

In the true double flower the transformation of the stamens has gone still farther and they have now been changed into broad clear colored petals. Sometimes these are interspersed with pollen bearing stamens, and in that case we have what is called a semi-double flower. Occasionally we

have a variety in which not only the stamens but even the stigma and the seed vessels have been transformed into petals. Such a bloom is completely double, and is incapable of producing seed.

The preference in Europe and America has been for the double type of flower, and we distinguish in this group various forms known as bomb, crown, rose, and semi-rose, according to their particular shapes and the arrangement of the petals. But in recent years the Peony growers of America have begun to turn their attention more and more to the Japanese type of bloom. My own impression is that we have begun to tire of the ever-increasing size and bulk of the full double flowers and to seek relief in a less heavy flower, one that is more likely to support itself without typing up, and which makes a better showing as a garden plant. But it must be admitted that as cut flowers the Japanese sorts are very fine too, and I hope that within a few years we shall find them much more widely cultivated in gardens than we have in the past.

I have long advocated the idea that all who love Peonies should not limit themselves to the commercial varieties, but should grow some seedlings of their own. It is a delightful occupation in itself, and it keeps alive one's interest in one's garden. Even the best collection of named sorts will become stale in time if there are no new ones coming on. But with a group of seedlings blooming for the first time each year your interest will be keenly awakened as the blooming season approaches. This is a very different matter however from putting your seedlings into commerce. People are proverbially apt to think their own geese are swans, and so it comes about that we are deluged now with new varieties which are being added to our already overburdened list at a rate of fifty or a hundred every year. I am often reminded of an old friend of mine years ago who was really a Rose fancier, but who grew Peonies too, and had raised a few seedlings. I saw him one summer just after the end of the Peony season, and he told me with great delight that his first seedling had come into bloom that year. "What was it like?" I asked. "It was a single pink. It was very beautiful," he replied. Now in a batch of mixed seedlings there are always likely to be about a third single pinks and single whites. And while they are all in a sense "very beautiful" one ought to remember that there is no justification for putting a variety into commerce unless it is really distinct from anything we have had before or superior to any older variety that resembles it. Remembering this you will suppress most of your very beautiful single whites and pinks, unless, as may happen once in a long while, you get one that is so fine in color or quality as to warrant you in propagating it. An English firm of Peony growers has put out into commerce about one hundred named sorts of single pink Peonies. It is safe to say that not more than one tenth of these are really distinct and valuable.

My final appeal to you is to use more intelligence and always more intelligence. Do not be satisfied with going to an exhibition and noting down the fine kinds you would like to add to your collection; but study the catalogues of Peony specialists so as to become acquainted with the extra early and the extra late kinds of Chinese Peonies; and then see also what there is to be had among those varieties which bloom before the Chinese Peonies have begun, - those lovely harbingers of Peony season which give you a foretaste of the joys that are to come later. And do not rest satisfied until

you have six weeks of Peony bloom in your own garden.