

THE FAWN

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The American Peony Society (APS) has just proclaimed the peony 'Pietertje Vriend Wagenaar' as the 2018 Gold Medal Winner and thus as the Peony of the Year 2019. Rumor has it, however, that this plant might be identical to a peony which is more widely known, The Fawn. Peony The Fawn is the variety of which I have the most plants in my cutflower fields, and it is my favorite lactiflora. I don't have Pietertje Vriend Wagenaar, so I cannot tell whether they are one and the same. The description of Pietertje Vriend Wagenaar fits The Fawn very well however, it should be a chance seedling, probably between Kansas and Sarah Bernhardt, with the plant habit inherited from the former and the colour of Sarah, but then speckled. Pronouncing its name is easy for me, living in the dutch speaking part of Belgium, but may be somewhat difficult for those that are native english speakers.

I have always had difficulty believing that a chance seedling would pop up in a commercial field, from varieties that nearly never give you any seed, and then grow into such a perfect plant. It's unlikely, though not impossible. What would be more likely is that a very small division of The Fawn ended up in the field and grew into a fine plant which was not recognized as the variety it already was and then named 'Pietertje Vriend Wagenaar'. I cannot be completely sure unless I see some 'Pietertje Vriend Wagenaar' for real of course, and the official registration has it that "The bloom has the color of Sarah Bernhardt, perhaps a little lighter", which is not true for The Fawn as it is a deeper pink, although from time to time some paler flowers may occur (see one of the images below), depending on shadow, soil, etcetera, but on average the color difference is obvious... If any reader has an opinion about this, feel free to share it in the comments below :-)

Now I was going to write a few words about The Fawn. It was registered by B.B. Wright from Iowa (USA), no date given, but probably around the second half of the 1930's as all his other introductions were registered at that time. (footnote: Kessenich, Greta M. (ed) *"Peonies 1986-1996"*. Minnesota: American Peony Society, 1996, p. 126.) None of all his other peonies are familiar to me, although I would have liked to see some more as The Fawn makes you wonder if his others were as good. It is available from many nurseries at an affordable price (statements of it being 'rare' are somewhat stretching the truth), which is logical since it has been a long time around and it grows and propagates rapidly.

Why is this my all-time favorite lactiflora? When the young stems and foliage emerge they are deep red and this remains so for quite a while, very attractive. The red coloration reappears in Autumn and the foliage is always very healthy until late in the season. At flowering time the foliage is dark green and you have a rather tall plant (some people claim that it is somewhat short, but here it is as tall as Sarah Bernhardt). The stems are incredibly sturdy, and with an open flower they take rain and wind better even than Old Faithful can. Even the smaller stems are sturdy enough to hold the flowers. A huge improvement over so many other lactifloras. It flowers somewhat late in the season, normally just before or overlapping with Sarah Bernhardt. The flowers' base color is indeed blush, but there are so many deep pink speckles on them that the end impression is a deep pink. The petals are nicely placed, it has a very large fully double flower with some stamens placed in between the petals. It is very, very floriferous and flowers for quite a long time, with a few (3 on average) sidebuds usually. The buds are something special. They are not rounded as with most peonies, but more 'rose formed', although this 'rose form' only appears just before opening (fortunately, otherwise rain would spoil the flowers, though it does make it difficult to keep the flowers in cold storage when there's water in between the petals of the flowers). Pale pink at the outer edges at first and then, when about to open, they change their color and become deeper pink. As a cutflower they should be harvested only at this time, not earlier, or they will not open as well (they will open, but far smaller). It's a fantastic cutflower with the sturdy tall stems that never bend over in a vase, they keep longer than Sarah Bernhardt as well. Only problem is that you must sometimes convince your customers that the 'rose buds' are not open flowers but still true peony buds. And whatever you may hear, it is not as pale pink as Sarah Bernhardt, thus it is not an improved replacement for it.

Enough talk, now some images, and if you have any experience with this cultivar, feel free to share them:

The Fawn

Open flower

Open flower

Color differences in the same field, left the usual color

Detail of a petal

Detail of a petal

Some harvested stems

Harvested stems close-up

'Rose-bud'

'Rose-bud'

'Rose-bud'

Bud opening

Opening flower

Fower with sidebuds

Opened indoors

First year plants (after some heavy rain)

Foliage (from cutting field)