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In the summer of 1978, Professor Per Wendelbo, director of the Gothenburg Botanical Garden, returned to Sweden after several years in Iran, where he had been supervising the creation of the Ariamehr Botanical Garden and the Botanical Institute of Iran in Tehran (known respectively post-revolution as the National Botanic Garden of Iran and the Research Institute of Forests and Rangelands).

Per was a great plantsman and had a large collection of live plant material and herbarium specimens. In an enthusiastic moment he invited Henrik Zetterlund into his office to show off a wonderful peony (27809) that he had collected together with his colleague Mostafa Assadi in early May. He was unsure whether this was *P. mlokosewitschii*, not previously found in Iran, or a new species. Henrik gained the impression that he was in favour of the first possibility.

As it turned out, Per never did name the herbarium specimen. One thing of which he was in no doubt, however, was that 'this plant must be introduced in cultivation'. On Per's request, Mostafa returned to the site on August 31 of the same year to make a seed collection (M. Assadi 30834) that Per later passed on to Henrik. The seeds were planted and germinated in the spring of 1980, with the first flowers appearing in the spring of 1983. Unfortunately, Per Wendelbo died in 1981 and never saw his peony in flower in cultivation. Since then this peony has been distributed from the Gothenburg Botanical Garden.

From the early days of horticulture,

An Iranian peony to honour Per Wendelbo

Jānis Rukšāns, bulb expert and nursery owner, and **Henrik Zetterlund**, the horticultural curator at the Gothenburg Botanical Garden, describe *Paeonia wendelboi*, a new herbaceous species from Iran

peonies have played an important role in gardens. They were first grown as medicinal plants and are still used as such in some cultures. They are popular garden plants due to their beauty and longevity and are divided into three sections: the Chinese section Moutan (the 'tree peonies'), whose members have a limited hardiness in northernmost Europe; the American section Onaepia, with the frost-hardy *P. brownii* and the tender *P. californica*; and the Eurasian and north-west African section Paeonia, which includes the largest number of species.

Yellow flowers occur in some members of section Moutan but these are of little value in the far north. Until recently,

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The brilliant yellow *Paeonia wendelboi*, in its typical rocky habitat in Iran, is proving to be a good garden plant

when the intersectional (Moutan and Paeonia) 'Itoh Hybrids' were raised, there was no hardy cultivar of tree peonies with really yellow flowers that could be grown at Jānis's nursery in Latvia.

Within section Paeonia, four Caucasian species are cited as yellowish to yellow – *P. wittmanniana*, *P. macrophylla*, *P. mlokosewitschii* and *P. tomentosa*.

The flowers of *P. wittmanniana* and *P. macrophylla* start off white or very pale yellow. *P. tomentosa* remains an enigma for the authors but is probably white-flowered. Only *P. mlokosewitschii*, described from Lagodekhi National Park in East Georgia, has pale lemon yellow flowers. The most visited population shows a remarkable variation of pinks and yellows, as is also found in *P.*

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The widely available and popular *Paeonia mlokosewitschii* growing in the Gothenburg Botanical Garden

lagodechiana and *P. x chameleon*. Perhaps this is a result of *P. mlokosewitschii* mixing with *P. caucasica* (*P. daurica* subsp. *coriifolia*). Like most members of section *Paeonia*, *P. mlokosewitschii* hybridises with its cousins so that plants grown from seed collected in the garden are liable to result in individuals with non-yellow flowers.

Here we want to cite the late Jim Archibald's seed list, in which he notes: '...in the wild the colour-forms

are mixed and [the fact] that what we grow in cultivation is a garden selection has been substantiated by Dr Michael Almond, who has visited this colony in flower (on steep, densely wooded slopes) and has sent us photographs showing the considerable colour variation from white and pink to yellow'. It is a typical forest plant that grows in some lighter spots under large deciduous trees and at the forest edge.

P. mlokosewitschii is quite tall, reaching

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The team guided by Jill White explores a slope covered with *Galanthus transcausicus* and other bulbous plants near the *Paeonia wendelboi* locality

as much as 1m in height. A few other species regarded as 'yellow' were most likely described from herbarium specimens, where white turns yellowish during the drying process. In gardens, *P. mlokosewitschii* is known as Molly-the-witch, but regardless of this somewhat unfavourable nickname it is one of the loveliest and best tempered of herbaceous perennials. *P. mlokosewitschii* prefers vernal moist, humus-rich, well-drained soil. It tolerates most pH values but will not put up with waterlogging or drought.

On July 17, 1975, Per Wendelbo and Mostafa Assadi drove up to Kuhha-ye Tales mountain ridge in Iran, from Asalem to Khalkhal, where they found a *Paeonia* species (18544) growing at

1,900-2,100m. Hong De-Yuan, in his monograph *Peonies of the World* (Kew), places this collection under *P. daurica* subsp. *tomentosa*. The locality is noted as 'above Sefid Poshteh', a village that we couldn't find on the map.

As mentioned earlier, Per Wendelbo and Mostafa Assadi took the same road in May 1978 and found a second species (27809) 'after [the] pass near Khalkhal'.

Our team, guided by Jill White (WHIR), drove along the same road on April 27, 2008. We made several stops and the first one was at an altitude of 1,970m between Nav and Khalkhal, where steep mountain slopes were covered with countless *Colchicum speciosum*, *Fritillaria kotschyana* subsp. *grandiflora*, *Galanthus transcausicus*, *Puschkinia*

scilloides and *Crocus archibaldiorum*. On the right side of the road were dense shrubs and a partly cut forest, but many large trees were left intact. On the left was a village, most likely the locality from where sample 18544 had originated.

According to Hong De-Yuan, *Paeonia tomentosa* (*P. daurica* subsp. *tomentosa*) is known from several localities in four districts. The northernmost is in Talysh, in the vicinities of Lerik and Lenkoran, from where several gatherings are known.

In the last days of April 1987, a team from Latvia (J. Rukšāns, A. Seisums and A. Zobova) observed this species in Talysh, where it was growing among low trees and scrub and in small clearings of *Fagus* forest at an altitude around 1,500m (gathering RSZ 8712B). We didn't see any specimens in open situations. The gathered sample is still growing well in the National Botanical Garden of Latvia at Salaspils.

All specimens seen by us had whitish flowers that we could not describe as yellow or even yellowish. All the gatherings by other botanists at Talysh (with habitat descriptions) had also been collected in forests.

In Iran *P. tomentosa* has been registered at three sites (Hong De-Yuan). Two of those are on the Kuhha-ye Alborz ridge in the Chalus Valley in Mazandaran (in the west) and in the Golestan National Park in Gorgan (in the east), where it was collected from 1,830-2,740m. The third is in Gilan near the road from Asalem to Khalkhal, as already mentioned.

Some 10km further along the road, in completely different ecological conditions, our team (WHIR) made

another stop at an altitude of 2,060-2,100m near sun-baked steep stony slopes facing south-west. These were sparsely covered with very dwarf and spiny shrubs and an incredibly bright yellow peony in full bloom, growing in cracks in the rock. This was the species collected by Per Wendelbo and Mostafa Assadi (27809). Its colour was so unusually deep yellow that at first glance Jānis didn't believe that it could be a herbaceous peony.

Compared with the white-coloured peonies in the vicinity, the leaves of the yellow-coloured plants were much more glaucous, with rounded segments and pubescence on the underside. In the white specimens, the leaves were darker green, distinctly pointed and acute.

This peony grows in full sun and is of dwarf habit, not exceeding 30cm in height while forming large flowers up to 7cm in diameter (in the wild). We spent a long time searching for seeds from the previous year and Jānis tried to collect a few very small seedlings, but this was extremely difficult because they had an unbranched and thickened root going deep down into the rock.

Surprisingly, two of the three collected plants (WHIR 133) sprouted the following spring in spite of the fact that they had been collected at flowering time, the worst possible time for replanting peonies. This species turned out to be an excellent grower both in the garden and under cover.

A seedling of this yellow peony raised from Jim Archibald's seeds was planted in the open garden by Jānis. It survived several winters and flowered for the first time in June 2013. The weather



Two images of *Paeonia tomentosa*



conditions in Latvia are quite harsh and moist, unlike those in Iran, but it seems that this peony is very tolerant of low temperatures in winter and moist soil and humid air in summer and autumn. Although it received sufficient moisture and fertiliser, its height in the garden did not surpass 35-40cm (it was planted in a partially shaded spot, therefore it was somewhat lanky). It set seeds after hand-pollination in the greenhouse as well as in the garden.

The white-flowered peony from the same roadside can be regarded as *P. tomentosa*, but this name cannot be



applied to the yellow-flowered plant collected in 1978 (27809). Although growing only some 8km distant in a straight line, both of them (the white one and the yellow one) are so different in all their features and ecology that they cannot be regarded as the same species, therefore the yellow peony certainly represents a new species.

In the trade this new species has been offered as *P. mlokosewitschii*, *Paeonia* sp. nova *mlokosewitschii* aff., and later as *P. iranica*, but we decided to name it *Paeonia wendelboi* after Per Wendelbo, who did much work for the fundamental *Flora Iranica* and who was the first to discover it.

Paeonia wendelboi Rukšāns & Zetterlund *species nova similia ad* *Paeonia tomentosa* Lomakin *et P. mlokosewitschii* Lomakin *sed differt floribus aureis, staturis minoribus (herbae ad 30 cm longas) et habitatione diverso.*

Type: Iran: Azerbaijan: Asalem to Khalkhal after pass near Khalkhal, 2,000m, May 5, 1978. P. Wendelbo & M. Assadi 27809. Dominating the whole mountain slope. Obviously not eaten by sheep. Flowers sulphur yellow, stamens yellow, leaves glaucous. Holo: GB, Iso: TARI.

The exact type location might be: prov. Ardabil, Kuhha-ye Tales mountain

Paeonia wendelboi, left and right, is yet another jewel in Iran's rich floral heritage



ridge, some 10km before Khalkhal on a roadside from Asalem after the pass, sun-baked, steep, south-west-facing stony slopes with sparse vegetation, 2,060m. 37.35.286 N; 48.38.877 E, where the living plants were found (Ruksans, April 26, 2008).

Distribution: At present it is known only from its *locus classicus*.

● We express our thanks to Dr Reinhardt Fritsch (Gatersleben) for checking our manuscript and the Latin diagnosis.

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Editor's note: In the March issue of *The Alpine Gardener*, Jānis Rukšāns described a new *Puschkinia* species which he named *P. kurdica*. The manuscript, received on November 29, 2013, was published on March, 13, 2014. On March 4, 2014, Turkish botanists published the same species online under the name *P. bilgineri* (the manuscript was received by the publisher on January 1, 2014). In accordance with the rules of the International Code of Nomenclature for algae, fungi and plants, priority belongs to the earlier published name, so this *Puschkinia* correctly must be named *P. bilgineri*, but *P. kurdica* may be regarded as its synonym.