

The Tree Peony – An Exquisite Flowering Shrub

OF ALL THE WONDERFUL flowering shrubs grown in our Pacific Northwest gardens perhaps the most exquisite of them all, the tree peony, has been largely overlooked until recently. The few that are grown by gardeners in our area are usually planted in back yards or other out-of-the-way areas where the casual passerby has no opportunity to view it.

Tree peonies are not really trees but rather deciduous shrubs native to ancient China. However, Greek mythology makes reference to them as far back as 300 B.C. In 79 A.D. Roman naturalist Pliny the Elder advised using the tree peony for medicinal purposes such as dissolving kidney stones. Later Greek physicians promoted its use for nightmares, hysteria and menstruation. Chinese botanical, horticultural, medicinal and historical reports and artistic designs and paintings can be traced back to 536 A.D. Early writings indicate it was a flower long cultivated and ancient Chinese called it the "King of Flowers" while it was known as the "Flower of Prosperity" in Japan. It

was first grown for its supposed medicinal properties and not until after 600 A.D. were tree peonies cultivated for their ornamental value, becoming the special plant of the emperors of the Tang Dynasty. By the year 750 there were 30 known varieties.

Europeans first became aware of tree peonies when a member of the Dutch East India Company wrote about the plant after a visit to Peking in 1656. Over a hundred years later (in 1787) Sir Joseph Banks of Kew Gardens, England, having seen Chinese drawings, came across the Dutch report. He arranged to procure a plant through a representative of the British East India Company. The original plant (or one obtained shortly thereafter) grew in a garden outside London until it was damaged beyond saving during a construction project in 1842. The European appreciation of tree peonies grew in the 1800's and by the turn of the century nurseries from Belgium to Italy began offering hundreds of varieties from China and later from Japan and Korea as well as their own hybrids. In 1823, one

(continued on page 2)

Dear Arboretum Patrons:

The Arboretum Associates have been actively pursuing ways to increase interest in the arboretum and to acknowledge our patrons.

The major project has been the development of a brochure. This brochure will be used to educate and attract visitors to the arboretum. Anna Fehrenbacher has done an outstanding job working with Beth Case, graphic designer for Printing & Design Services at the university. Our goal is to have the final document available by mid-December so it can be entered in a publication competition.

A new membership program is in the development phase. We plan to take an active role in acknowledging donors and

keeping records of the membership. This will be a new task for the Arboretum Associates but we feel it will provide a better opportunity to acknowledge and promote our membership.

To help visitors identify the groves and individual specimens in the arboretum, we plan to have a map in the spring issue of *Arboretum Notes*.

In our effort to better meet your needs we'd like your input. Drop us a note or give me a call at 885-6977 or 883-0871.

Sincerely,

Beverly Rhoades
President, Arboretum Associates

Coming Home to the Arboretum office

Ghosts of students past welcome the Arboretum Associates Board to a meeting in Director Naskali's office (Continuing Education Building, room 205). Board member Norma Dobler, who came home to the room that was hers in 1937-38, introduced her former roommates and described placement of furniture in the suite that housed five co-eds back then (55 years ago!).

ArborNotes

A Newsletter of
the Arboretum Associates
University of Idaho
Arboretum and Botanical Garden

Published annually by
ARBORETUM ASSOCIATES
University of Idaho
Room 207
Administration Annex Building
Moscow, Idaho 83844-3147

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December 1995

(Tree Peony cont.)

Belgian tree peony fancier reportedly grew from seed a plant so glorious that he allowed only his closest friends to see it. He had two dogs guard the plant day and night for nearly 30 years to prevent anyone from taking a cutting from it. However, his efforts went for naught because in the 1860's the plant was available in nurseries, purportedly from stolen scions.

In the 1890's, Thomas J. Oberlin of Sinking Spring, Pennsylvania, imported plants from Japan and started what may be the first serious tree peony propagation program in America. However, the tree peony, for all its fine qualities is found so infrequently in our gardens that many people have never seen one in bloom.

Some of the most readily available tree peonies in our area are Japanese cultivars of *Paeonia suffruticosa* otherwise known as Moutans. Their divided foliage is a wonderful contrast in the garden and their stems are very upright, presenting their flowers in a very showy manner. The Chinese cultivars of *P. suffruticosa* are somewhat more difficult to find but their blooms can be so full that they bend under their own weight.

Other available types of tree peonies are the European and American hybrids of *Paeonia lutea*. They are best known for their yellow flowers but this group also includes black-reds, copper and sunset colors, often with dark red flares at the base of the petals. The heavy double flowers of this group give it a nodding rather than upright habit. *P. lutea* often has several flowers to a stem.

Most tree peonies are hardy in zones 3 to 8 and bloom in May or June, depending on the zone. They have translucent ruffled single, semi-double or fully double flowers in a wide range of textures including silky, satiny, crisp, frilled, twisted and crinkled. The colors range from cream,

pink, red, purple and yellow to blackish red, most having a contrasting darker "eye." The flowers can be small or reach dinner plate size depending on the variety. The shrubs can attain a height of three to five feet or larger and should be treated as specimen plants rather than placed in a jumbled flower bed. They prefer protection from hot midday sun and drying winds which burn the petals or break the stems. A **large** hole with well-drained, moisture-retentive slightly acid soil is recommended with the addition of 2 pounds of bone meal stirred in at planting time. The trick to successful planting is to place the graft union 5 inches below grade to encourage the grafted cultivar to form its own roots and subterranean buds, minimizing the chance of understock growth taking over. Also, rather than tamping the loose soil around the plant, flood the loose soil and let the water draw the soil around the root system. Add additional soil mix to the hole when the water has drained. An annual dressing of bone meal right after bloom meets their fertilizing needs. Extra superphosphate results in more but smaller and inferior blooms while high-nitrogen fertilizers force vegetative instead of flowering growth. When cutting flowers or pruning stems, covering the cut with a dab of Elmer's glue prevents damage by borers.

The scarcity of tree peonies on the Palouse is about to change. The University of Idaho Arboretum has two new tree peony groves planted in the Asian section. The Moscow Garden Club raised the funds for one through fall plant sales in the community, and the other grove is in memory of Hallie Seaman. The 32 varieties in these groves will be spectacular when mature and for many years thereafter. I hope you will be one of the tree peony's regular visitors once they begin to bloom.

—Story by Marlene Johnston

Acknowledgement of Gifts

Life Associates:

Moscow Rotary Club
Carol & Malcolm Renfrew
Mary & Francis Seaman
Norma & Gene Slade
Marguerite & Charles J. Smiley
Ruth L. & H. Myrl Stearns
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*During the Period July 1, 1995
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Pam & Bob Steele
Tidyman's Warehouse Foods

Arboretum Associates Treasurer's Report

- Bob Steele

The University of Idaho Arboretum and Botanical Garden is more than a beautiful place. It's a laboratory, a classroom, a nature preserve, and more. It's a place where scientists, gardeners, and students can gather to study trees and plants from the world's temperate regions. It's a place where school children can go on field trips to learn about nature in an outdoor classroom, and where walkers, joggers, and bicyclists can enjoy beautiful views of the rolling farm land of the Palouse." *The first paragraph in the newest University of Idaho Arboretum & Botanical Garden brochure.*

The fact that this can be said is a tribute to the hundreds of individuals and organizations whose generous tax deductible donations have provided the critical resources that enable Dr. Naskali to obtain appropriate plantings for inclusion in the four geographical sections located within the 63 acres which comprise The University of Idaho Arboretum and Botanical Garden ("The Arboretum").

The University's operating budget provides the resources necessary to pay Dr. Naskali and the seasonal groundsman who mow, water, and otherwise care for the plantings. But the plant specimens, benches, grove markers, and individual

plant identification tags are funded by private donations.

Webster's New World Dictionary defines philanthropy as — "a desire to help mankind, esp. as shown by gifts to charitable or humanitarian institutions." Today's donations to the Arboretum help ensure that our generation will be providing a useful legacy for future generations to enjoy and appreciate. I would like to personally invite everyone to include "The Arboretum" in their philanthropic plan. Remember, gifts completed by midnight on December 31 are deductible on your 1995 tax returns. Your tax deductible gifts may be sent to Room 207, Administration Annex Building, University of Idaho, Moscow, Idaho 83844-3147. Make all checks payable to the University of Idaho Foundation, Inc. Contribution categories for Arboretum Associates affiliations are listed below. If you have questions about special opportunities for funding groves, benches, flower gardens or individual trees, call (208) 885-4000.

July 1, 1995 marked the beginning of a new fiscal year (1995-96) and on behalf of Arboretum Associates, I would like to extend a heartfelt thank you to the fiscal year 1995-96 contributors listed on this page whose gifts had been received as of October 31, 1995:

We invite you to support the **UI ARBORETUM AND BOTANICAL GARDEN** project. This form is provided for your convenience.

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Enclosed is my contribution of \$ _____

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Please mail your tax deductible contributions to: Arboretum Associates, Rm 207 AD Annex Bldg., University of Idaho, Moscow, Idaho 83844-3147. We invite your comments.

TJF001



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