

Garden Column

August 2, 2015

Peonies

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I used to pejoratively refer to peonies as an “old ladies plant”. No disrespect intended but this attitude originated from memories of my German grandmothers and their visitors stoically examining the red, pink, or white flowers. I picture those ladies in their aprons besmirched with the makings of “dinner or supper”. These were farm ladies after all, staunch German Lutherans, and dinner was the noon and supper the evening meal. Their hair was normally pulled into a gray bun and their usual placid expressions only gave away to a partial smile when they smelled a particularly aromatic blossom. But it had to be a strong odor! No oohs or aahs. It was construed as unseemly to be too demonstrative when accolades of one’s cooking, sewing, and plant growing accomplishments were voiced. The custom among these ladies was demure denial.

The opening of the peony blossoms on those northern Minnesota farms seemed like the unofficial beginning of summer and the end of spring. Usually the plants were in the unkempt yard of a farm house and received only the minimum of horticultural attention or, usually, none at all. There was normally high grass growing through the foliage and other weeds surrounding the plants. It was pure happenstance that infrequent lawn mowing left the plants unscathed. They received no fertilizer and the most attention paid to these hardy plants was the annual inspection of the blossoms. The closest horticultural husbandry these plants received was blossoms cut with about 10 inches of stem and placed into a vase or, more likely, a Mason jar situated on the kitchen or living room table. Their odor wafted through the house and one understood that meant summer was certainly here and soon it would be time to harvest hay.

Since that time I have come to appreciate what a beautiful plant this is to grow in Minnesota gardens with only a modicum of care. Not only are the blooms a welcome splash of color but the leaves lend a nice texture to the garden that harmonizes with the foliage of other plants.

Two types of peonies are generally grown in the home landscape. *Paeonia* spp. hybrids (garden peonies) and *Paeonia suffruticosa* (tree peony). There are hundreds, perhaps thousands, of varieties of *Paeonia* spp. The plant originated in China although some botanists claim peonies originated in Japan as there are types of peonies that are referred to as “Japanese types”.

Peonies are classified according to flower form. All peonies have five or more large outer petals called guard petals and a center of stamens or modified stamens. Single forms have centers of pollen-bearing stamens. Centers of semi-double forms consist of broad petals intermingled with pollen bearing stamens. Double types have dense centers of only broad petals. The anemone form have more than one row of guard petals encircling a center of thin, petal-like structures. Japanese types are similar to anemones but have staminodes or stamens that do not produce pollen in their centers.

Flower color may be any color in the rainbow except blue. Gardeners are familiar with the iconic pink, red and white types. However, yellow has become a popular color and some plants have combinations of white, yellow and even green in their blossoms. Flowering usually lasts one week in late spring to early summer. However, by selecting early mid- and late-season bloomers, flowering can be extended for weeks. Peonies grow from two to four feet and thrive in sunny locations and well-drained soils but tolerate a wide range of soil types. Peonies like soils to be on the dry side rather than too wet. One of the worse things gardeners can do is to

overwater peonies. Better to leave plants too dry rather than overwatered. Best plant growth is in a soil with a pH of 6.5 to 7.5, and rich in organic matter. They are hardy from USDA zones 2 to 8 with some exceptions.

Planting, transplanting, and dividing peonies are best done in early fall but may be done in spring as soon as soils are workable. Now would be a good time to peruse the many peony varieties currently available at Bloomers. Pick out your favorite color and plant in that empty spot in the flower garden.

Place the peony in a hole large enough to accommodate the roots and into which well composted organic matter is placed along with some 0-10-10 fertilizer. The eyes of the plant should be one or two inches below the soil surface. It is beneficial to fertilize with a 0-10-10 (or similar fertilizer) after plants bloom. Nitrogen will cause excessive foliage growth at the expense of blossoms.

Peonies, like my grandmother's, may be left in place for several years but a decline in flower production usually means overcrowding and the need for root division. Failure to bloom may be caused by planting too deeply, excess nitrogen, inadequate sunlight, overcrowding, phosphorous and or potassium deficiency or late freezes in the spring.

Peonies have few insect and disease problems. The most frequent disease is Botrytis blight and leaf blight, a fungal disease prevalent during wet springs. Spots appear on leaves, stems soften and decay, and flowers either rot or buds blacken and fail to open. Prompt removal of infected leaves and a thorough fall cleanup are essential for control. Other diseases are Phytophthora blight and Verticillium wilt, both caused by soil fungi with no cure other than destroying infected plants.

The only insect of any consequence is scale. The ants crawling over the buds are neither beneficial or harmful to the plants. They are simply attracted to the sugary liquid secreted by flower buds.

Bloomers have only a few plants left for this growing season; however, think ahead. Next year, Bloomers will have a large selection of quality plants. Be sure to plan the garden and get these plants before they are sold out.