

The learning curve

Val Bourne

Although my pieces for this journal are called *The Learning Curve*, sometimes my gardening life takes a sudden turn in a completely new direction, so perhaps they should be called *The Learning Tangent* instead. Just recently, rather unexpectedly, I have veered off into species peonies. I've always been into peonies you understand, especially the fragrant Chinese *Paeonia lactiflora* hybrids that come in summery shades of pink, magenta and cream. Probably my best, most floriferous performer is the pink-red 'Karl Rosenfield' (fig. 1), a cultivar bred by Rosenfield in America in 1908. After a cold winter, something these peonies adore, it can produce fifty buds which open over many weeks. These Chinese *lactiflora* peonies (often bred in France in the mid-19th century) pre-empt the roses and flatter them: with their glossy foliage and globular flowers it is a marriage made in heaven.

The friable soil here at Spring Cottage is perfect for peonies and roses for, although we sit high above the Cotswolds, we are on the spring line, so moisture is abundant in certain areas of the garden throughout the year. I even break the organic gardener's covenant: I sprinkle Vitax Q4 round the peonies and roses every spring to give extra flower-power. It is the only non-organic thing I do!

The clump of 'Karl Rosenfield' belonged to the Best Beloved, also a peony fan, so

this is one plant we cannot argue about. It has been transplanted three times in eleven years, demolishing the old wives' tale that peonies cannot be moved. This is ancient folklore. Pliny the Elder, writing in the 1st century BC, records that peonies should not be moved in daylight in case a woodpecker pecks out your eyes. Peonies have a long history of being a powerful cure-all – hence they are named after the Greek Physician Paeon who could cure the Gods. Tampering with them could be dangerous. If it seems far-fetched that a completely wrong idea can persist for thousands of years, remember that



Fig. 1 *P. lactiflora* 'Karl Rosenfield'

our earliest garden book (Thomas Hill's *The Garden Labyrinth*, published in 1577) repeats most of the ancient Roman texts almost word for word. Cutting off the tips and roots of leeks, for instance, is an ancient custom detailed in 380 by Palladius Rutilius who borrowed from Pliny and Columella at length. I cannot get this man's name right. I refer to him as Rootus Punctilious, which would be such a good name for my pedantic better half.

The wonderful thing about lactiflora hybrids is their ability to flower for a long time and to create a real presence. Species peonies, on the other hand, tend to be ephemeral, with fleeting single flowers that soon disappear. It came as something of a surprise when I began to fall in love with them, for it's quite possible to have a busy week and miss the flowers completely. In fact this has happened to me several times with the pale-yellow *P. mlokosewitschii* (Molly the Witch) (fig. 2), especially in windy springs. However, the felted carpels that follow, like jaunty jester's caps, somehow make up for the disappointment. Finally they split open to reveal black seeds set amongst Barbara-Cartland-pink unfertilised ovules.

So why I am drawn to them? Species peonies tend to flower earlier, often in April and May, and they produce wonderful buds with a glossy coating that's popular with ants. The single, bowl-like flowers have elegance and simplicity, and the petals usually cradle a mass of feathery warm-yellow stamens. The foliage is often handsome and distinctive with a lot of variety and texture. *P. tenuifolia*, a species found in meadows from Transylvania across to the Caucasus, has wisps of leaf that curl up like smoke just under the clear-red flowers. *P. cambessedesii* (fig. 3) has wavy grey-green foliage that could be mistaken for a hellebore (*H. x sternii*) at first glance. Now found only rarely in the rocky limestone areas of the Balearic Islands, this peony produces pink flowers in early spring. I have mine close to the house and so far it has come through two savage winters unscathed, although it's yet to flower! Others grow it on well-drained scree beds.



Fig. 2 *P. mlokosewitschii*

Last year I tracked down a copy of a book I've coveted for years – *A Study of the Genus Paeonia* by F. C. Stern, published in 1946. Although the botanical descriptions pass me by, there are wonderful line drawings of the foliage and seedheads plus sumptuous colour plates by Lilian Snelling. The Lindley Library holds 600 of her illustrations and you can buy some as reproductions. Her wonderful plates negate the need for worrying about words like obovate and orbicular. I leave that to the botanist in our relationship.



Fig. 3 *P. cambessedesii*

This expensive set of three volumes, entitled *Peonies of the World*, by Hong de-Yuan, reworks the taxonomy so I will have to go back to the start and relearn my names. A technical work by a Professor of Botany from Beijing, the first volume contains wonderful black-and-white drawings and the slim second volume has photographs of peonies in the wild; the third is due out in 2013. De-Yuan's photographs of peonies in their native habitats are fascinating, because it shows how many grow in wooded conditions. As I have taken to tucking mine under the wings of lactiflora hybrids I am rather cheered by this. It also shows the damage done to wild populations in China by collectors who supply herbalists: often the bark is stripped off the roots.

The pictures also show the natural variations of leaf and flower found within the same species. They are prone to hybridise – which seems a contradiction botanically speaking – but they also do it in gardens. I first became aware of this promiscuity in Glenis Dyer's wonderful Warwickshire garden, Elm Close, which is open under the NGS. Some of her Molly seedlings had peach or pink flowers. So now I am collecting and growing on seeds from various sources and in ten years' time I shall hopefully have more species peonies and, if they vary a little from their parents, so much the better.

I am following Glenis Dyer's technique of sowing the seeds in a sand bed, and hopefully Poppy cat won't get in on the act. This method is also recommended by a newly published Timber Press book, *The Complete Guide to Saving Seeds* by Robert Gough and Cheryl Moore-Gough. This husband-and-wife team, who combine science with gardening, also recommend rubbing the impervious seed coat with sandpaper, or shaking them about with sharp sand. Many an old gardener kept valuable seeds in his jacket pocket, along with his small change, for just this purpose. Peony seeds take a year to germinate, at least, and several years to flower in most cases. Luckily Glenis has fast-tracked me by giving me some well-grown plants. 🌸

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