

## Book Review

### Peonies

Gail Harland

80pp

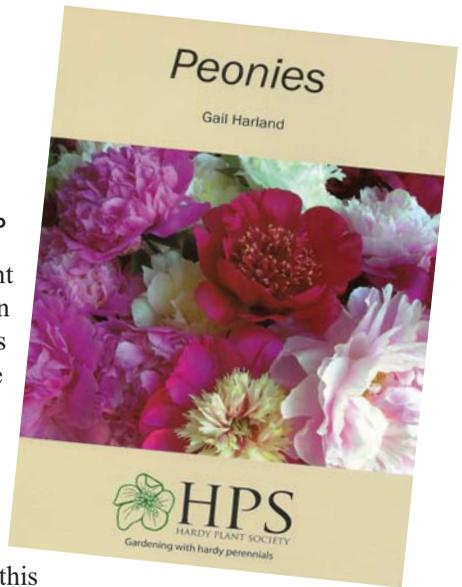
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I have been a member of the Hardy Plant Society for almost as long as I have been in horticulture, and collecting the HPS Booklets has always been useful in helping me decide which species and varieties to grow in my nursery, as well providing important tips on propagation and cultivation.

I have to take my hat off to the HPS and Gail Harland for producing what I think is their best publication to date. In just 80 pages this booklet comprehensively covers a whole range of topics from the fascinating history of peonies to descriptions of some of the best varieties available today.

Peonies are my passion, and for me and many others they are the 'King of Flowers'. Surprisingly there are still many misconceptions about growing these wonderful plants – supposedly that they can't be moved, their shyness of flowering, short flowering time and even hardiness. At Chelsea a few years ago I lost my voice trying to explain to people why their peonies did not flower. The following year I gave out a leaflet and managed to keep my vocal chords intact for the duration of the show. All these topics are dealt with here in the Cultivation section. As with any genus, a little understanding of their basic requirements will produce magnificent plants and show just how tough and easy they are to grow. The few pests and diseases affecting peonies are described and solutions explained, although I find that good housekeeping goes a long way in growing good healthy plants that rabbits and deer won't eat.

It is good to see the new taxonomy structure being used for classifying the various sections of the genus and reallocating certain species. This will not affect the average gardener but is very useful for peony enthusiasts and professionals. (An in-depth study is Hong De-yuan's *Peonies of the World* 2010 monograph.) The Directory of Peonies is divided into 3 sections. The description of 13 herbaceous species includes their history, habitat and cultivation requirements, all very useful for those who prefer growing species plants. It should be noted that peonies are notoriously promiscuous, so try and source seed from reputable suppliers who know when and where the seed was collected. The other 49 herbaceous hybrids and cultivars are made up of a broad mix of well known names from the 1840s to the present. Many of the older varieties



such as ‘Duchesse de Nemours’, ‘Festiva Maxima’ ‘Sarah Bernhardt’ and ‘Monsieur Jules Elie’ have been the backbone of the cut-flower industry for generations, but all, apart from ‘Festiva Maxima’, need supporting. Recently herbaceous peony hybrids and cultivars are being bred more to be good garden plants, and the American Peony Society’s list of ALM (‘Award of Landscape Merit’) plants that perform well in most garden conditions is increasing annually. It is impossible to list in a booklet this size all the wonderful modern herbaceous peonies available, but I think it would have been helpful to include a good few more of the recent introductions.

The second part on Tree Peonies lists great selections from Professor Saunders (whom I regard as the Godfather of peonies) and another American breeder Nasso Daphnis, plus Japanese, Chinese and European hybrids and a few species. Most are available from Britain’s specialist nurseries and others from Europe, but do take care that the plants are properly named as many that were misnamed arrived from the Far East a decade or so ago.

The third part deals with the Intersectional or ‘Itoh’ hybrids, which were developed in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century but became widely available only about ten years ago. Initially most were yellow but there is an ever increasing range of colours. Their flowers and foliage resemble that of Tree Peonies but their habit is herbaceous. They are more expensive but their hybrid vigour makes up for this. I have made a hedge in my front garden with many of these much sought after plants.

Peonies are regarded as ‘high-end’ plants so if you buy and plant well they will live for decades. Specialist peony growers go to great lengths to ensure that plants are true to name and supply good-quality flowering-sized roots. Cheap, garden-centre 1- or even 2-litre plants can take a while to establish. Some even come from knackered European ex-cut-flower stock.

I would highly recommend the HPS Booklet on Peonies to both beginners and knowledgeable gardeners – lots of vital information about this very special genus. I will treasure mine, and not just because my German Shepherd has just chewed up my *Gardener’s Guide to Peonies*. 

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Booklets can be ordered from:

The Administrator, Hardy Plant Society,

15 Basepoint Business Centre, Crab Apple Way, Evesham, WR11 1GP

Tel: 01386 710317

Order forms for members and non-members are on the HPS website –

[www.hardy-plant.org.uk](http://www.hardy-plant.org.uk)

The Peony Group Study Day on 11th May at Wansford, Cambs, includes talks and garden visits. The Study Day is open to all HPS members.