

Serendipity in Peonies

John Hudson and Judy Templar

Spring-flowering species peonies, with their elegant single flowers and attractive foliage, deserve a place in our gardens just as much as the sumptuous double lactifloras that are regarded as an essential part of an early-summer garden. The spring-flowering species are much less often seen because few are readily available as plants. The best way to acquire them is to grow them from seed offered by societies such as the HPS, the HPS Peony Group or the AGS, and subsequently to save, and then share, one's own seed.

Peonies are promiscuous plants, so if you raise seedlings from open-pollinated plants the results may not always be what you expect. Surprises turn up, and sometimes these are pleasant surprises, revealing themselves several years after sowing. We describe two such cases from our experience.



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Fig. 1 'Judy's White' peony



Figs 2 & 3 'Judy's White' peony

'Judy's White' peony

My plant was grown from seed obtained through a Society seed list as *Paeonia cambessedesii*. The seed was sown in January 1990, and by September 1991 roots had started to emerge. The following January leaves appeared and looked somewhat like *P. cambessedesii*.

By May 1995 the plant was in a 15cm pot and flowered for the first time. Its two cup-shaped flowers, 4–5cm across, were unexpectedly white, and lacked the attractive wavy margins. The foliage was also unlike *P. cambessedesii*. Nevertheless it was planted in my Yorkshire garden where it continued to bear small white flowers until it was potted up in preparation for a house move in 1999. Three years later a home was found for it in a south-facing position in the heavy clay soil of my present garden in King's Cliffe, Northamptonshire.

On release from the confines of the pot it grew vigorously, increasing in leaf and flower size. In 2004 it had 30 flowers and buds. Four years later it had grown to about 150cm across and had 70 flowers (fig. 1). It continued to grow, to bear greater numbers of flowers and to set abundant seed until 2013, when it seemed to be in decline. Perhaps it would benefit from division but I don't relish the task of heaving the huge plant out of the clay.

Within the Peony Group of the HPS this plant has become known, informally, as "Judy's White Peony", although it is creamy rather than pure white. To describe this peony briefly, the leaf resembles the drawing Martin Page gives of *P. mlokosewitschii* in *The Gardener's Guide to Growing Peonies*, but the leaflets are narrower, longer, and have a more acute tip. Both flower stems and petioles are red. The creamy white flowers (fig. 2) measure 10–12cm across and open in mid-April to reveal a boss of yellow anthers surrounding 2–5 densely hairy (tomentose) carpels with red stigmas.

In seed the plant is no less spectacular, with glowing red, infertile ovules interspersed with shiny black, fertile seeds (fig. 3). Several self-sown seedlings have appeared over the years, some of which have now flowered.

‘Judy’s Daughters’

The progeny of ‘Judy’s White’ are turning out to be a diverse lot – predictably, I suppose, considering that their mother is a hybrid and there are many peonies in this garden for her to play with.

One group of seeds which settled at the base of a young snake-bark maple have produced six seedlings with foliage ranging from quite a deep red to pale green and the flowers from pink to white. The carpels are mainly tomentose, but at least one is smooth and hairless (glabrous).

The most striking plant and one that brings to mind *P. cambessedesii*, the supposed seed parent of ‘Judy’s White’, is a seedling I sent to Barbara Adam, who photographed it when it first flowered in 2013 (fig. 4).

A further seedling flowered in John Hudson’s garden. It has rather small white flowers and reminds me of ‘Judy’s White’ when she first flowered, although some slight pink streaks can be seen on the petals (fig. 5).

Seeds of both ‘Judy’s White’ and ‘Judy’s Daughters’ have been distributed by the Peony Group. It will be interesting to see what the race of further daughters and granddaughters are like.

Judy Templar



Fig. 4 ‘Judy’s Daughters’ in Barbara Adam’s garden



Fig. 5 ‘Judy’s Daughters’ in John Hudson’s garden

Two descendents of *Paeonia mlokosewitschii*

Some 40 years ago, before we moved to our present house, my late wife and I bought a small plant of *Paeonia mlokosewitschii* from Hillier's nursery. In 1976 it moved with us to Deene Cottage, where it eventually produced its glorious yellow flowers, getting bigger and better for many years before going into a slow decline. Early on we also bought *Paeonia veitchii* from The Plantsman nursery in Dorset. There weren't many other peonies in the garden at that time.

I saved seed from *P. mlokosewitschii*, and obtained two viable seedlings. As they grew and flowered, by the mid-1980s they were obviously different from their seed-parent both in foliage and in having pale pink flowers. One lacked stamens and was discarded, but the other grew strongly, perhaps with hybrid vigour, and soon it made a big plant in a shady position. In early May 2003 it was 80cm tall with a wide spread of 170cm and over 50 large flowers (fig. 6). The flowers open a very attractive soft apricot-pink, fading rather rapidly to nearly white (fig. 7). The filaments are cream, the anthers pale yellow, and there are three tomentose carpels. Flowering is extended by smaller side-flowers along the stem, unlike the seed-

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Fig. 6 John's *P. mlokosewitschii* seedling

parent. The foliage is much divided, more like *P. veitchii*, with up to 20 lanceolate leaflets with acute tips. Some terminal leaflets are trifid.

The plant thus appears to be intermediate between its seed parent, *P. mlokosewitschii*, and *P. veitchii*, resembling the former in its large open flowers and the latter in its foliage and in having several flowers per stem. This parentage cannot be proved, and doubt could be cast because in my garden at present the two species do not flower concurrently, *P. veitchii* being the later.

A few years ago the original plant started to decline, perhaps because of its rather dank site, so I divided it. There are now three plants, two in my garden and one in Judy Templar's. All are growing strongly. Judy's had 14 flowers in 2013.

The next generation

The first plant just described set seed sparingly in its early

days. I raised one successful seedling (pollen-parent unknown) which flowered in the mid-1990s. It made a really nice plant, smaller and neater than its parent. In 2003 it was 70cm tall with a spread of 90cm, and it had 15 flowers, bowl-shaped, bright mid-pink, with a prominent ring of bright yellow anthers (fig. 8). There are three tomentose carpels. The stems are red. The lower leaves have at least 15 lanceolate leaflets, many bifid, trifid or even more divided in their terminal leaflets and in some lateral leaflets also. The upper surface of the leaves is dark green with deeply impressed veins.

This plant never set seed, and eventually started to decline. In 2012 I divided it and now have three plants, one of which has flowered.

Neither of these plants has even an informal name. They do not set seed well, if at all, but the divisions are flourishing and it should be possible to distribute them in small quantities.

John Hudson



Fig. 7 John's *P. mlokosewitschii* seedling



Fig. 8 John's second-generation peony

Our plants resulted from uncontrolled open-pollination. Controlled cross-pollination is also possible. The results will not be as serendipitous, but will never be entirely predictable because of the complex genetic make-up of peonies. Between 1916 and his death in 1953, Professor A P Saunders crossed all species available to him in the USA. He raised thousands of seedlings, selecting and distributing the best. Many of his crosses involved varieties of *P. lactiflora*,

resulting in peonies intermediate in type between that and the early species. Some of Professor Saunders' crosses are still available, such as 'Requiem' and 'Legion of Honor'. Few of us have the time, space or resources to match this prodigious effort, but we hope to have shown that worthwhile results can be achieved, on a small scale, by amateurs like ourselves who are willing to try their luck. 🍀

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Judy Templar is Chairman of the HPS Peony Group and organises its seed exchange. Her main interest is in species plants and in propagation by seed, and frequent botanical holidays.

Please note that in this article we have used the species names most familiar to gardeners. In Hong's monograph of the wild species (1910), *P. veitchii* is *P. anomala* subsp. *veitchii*, and *P. mlokosewitschii* is *P. daurica* subsp. *mlokosewitschii*. There is some doubt as to whether the yellow cultivated form is representative of the wild population, which also includes pink and pale cream forms.

This article is modified and updated from articles published in the HPS Peony Group Newsletter in 2005, 2008 and 2012.