

When you least expect it, along comes a learning experience that blossoms into a passion. Such an experience occurred for me on May 29, 2009. On that particular day, Rita and I were in Omaha visiting our children. Together, we decided to tour Omaha's renowned Lauritzen Gardens. While on the tour, it was the peony garden that captured my attention. This garden not only displayed numerous beautiful herbaceous peonies, but it also featured an extensive collection of Chinese and Japanese tree peonies. Prior to that day, I had known little about tree peonies and had seen only a few. The peony garden featured well over one hundred eighty peonies including fifty-seven tree peonies. Since that day, I am reasonably sure many more have been added.

It was then, while viewing these elegant flowers that I desired to learn more about tree peonies and yearned to grow them in our landscape. We now have three tree peonies growing in our yard, as well as one called an intersectional peony. My goal for the future is to add many more.

Tree peonies, unlike herbaceous peonies, produce woody stems and do not die back to the ground. The tree peony (*Paeonia suffruticosa*) is one of the most impressive shrubs known to humankind. Mature plants are capable of reaching four-to-five feet in height and width and producing a multitude of huge, stunning, and silky blooms. Tree peonies are known to live more than one hundred years.

Nearly every spring, after the peonies have finished blooming, someone calls me asking if he or she should remove the spent flower heads. My general response to the question is yes. Flowering plants reproduce sexually. The results of a successfully fertilized flower are seeds. Generally, I promote deadheading, a name given to the process of removing spent flowers. Deadheading inhibits seed production and stimulates additional flowering.

Did you know the vast majority of peonies produce viable seeds if the seed pods are allowed to remain on the plant throughout the summer? Although most people start peonies in their landscape from potted transplants, the fact remains: peonies can also be grown from seed. This year, rather than deadheading, I allowed a cluster of seed pods to develop on one of our tree peonies. Research has shown that now, mid-August, is the opportune time to collect and plant tree peony seeds. One must realize that most flowering plants, including peonies raised from seed, do not necessarily come true to the parent plant although they may strongly

resemble it. The exception to this rule is if seeds are collected from a single species of peony which did not cross pollinate with another peony.

Attached is a photo of the tree peony seed pods as they appeared on the plant. Since that photo, I have removed the seed pods and harvested the seeds. Also attached is a photo of harvested seeds. Each of these seeds resembles a tiny pearl. I am thrilled to know that within each lustrous pearl is the beginning of a tree peony, one the world has never before seen in bloom. Furthermore, each has the potential to astonish spectators for years to come.



In the next few days I will be planting the seeds. I have discovered this new learning experience calls for patience and lots of it. Growing tree peonies from seed may take as long as five years before one can witness a plant in bloom. Even so, I view this learning experience to be well worth the wait.