

Yard and Garden – 06-06-09 – Ted Griess / Extension Horticulture Assistant

Sometimes when you least expect it, along comes a new learning experience. Such an experience recently occurred for me. On Friday, May 29th, Rita and I ventured to Omaha. While there, we had the enjoyable opportunity of visiting our children and grandchildren. As all grandparents know, that in itself is a wonderful learning experience; however, it was the activity we did together that enlightened me.

Early Saturday morning the seven of us headed to the east edge of Omaha to tour Omaha's Botanical Garden called the Lauritzen Gardens. The first and only other time I had visited these gardens was in June of 2008. On that summer's day, temperatures reached over 100°F., and lovely as it was, we cut our visit short. Fortunately, last Saturday morning, with temperatures in the high seventies and a cool southern breeze, together we strolled and rolled the gardens.

The Lauritzen Gardens are relatively young. Although it involved decades of planning, the gardens officially opened in 1995. Located among natural woods near a bluff just west of the Missouri River and planted on rolling terraces, this one hundred acre garden is truly a site to behold. One can either walk the gardens or enjoy a tram ride. Or, if you're a Griess grandkid, you might even get your own Radio Flyer wagon ride. New garden areas are added yearly to undeveloped areas.

One garden that particularly caught my attention was the peony garden. Located near the English perennial border and between the Victorian garden and Garden in the Glen is the peony garden. Developed in 2006, this garden features an extensive collection of

Chinese and Japanese tree peonies along with herbaceous peonies. I'd always known about tree peonies, but I hadn't seen many — viewing this was a new experience for me.



Unlike herbaceous peonies, tree peonies produce woody stems and do not die back to the ground. The tree peony (*Paeonia suffruticosa*) is one of the most glorious shrubs known to humankind. Mature plants reach four to five feet and produce up to fifty huge, silky blooms. Tree peonies grow best in full sun or partial shade. They prefer evenly moist, well-drained soil with a pH close to neutral. Tree peonies have larger flowers and are available in a wider

range of colors than herbaceous peonies. Much to my surprise, one of the tree peonies I saw in the garden was a bright yellow, a color rarely if ever seen in herbaceous varieties. Furthermore, tree peonies often have flowers with contrasting centers.

Tree peonies were once grown exclusively for the emperor of China. For hundreds and even thousands of years, Asian gardeners have treasured these spectacular plants. Today, the tree peony is the national flower of China. The Lauritzen Peony Garden has an Oriental feel. Focal points of the garden include sculpture, benches and meandering paths.

Tree peonies, like herbaceous peonies, bloom from early May to early June. Had we been a week or two earlier, we'd have seen more blooms, but we did get to see some beautiful flowers. The indescribable beauty and fragrance of these large, silk-looking flowers must be seen to be appreciated. Even the grandkids loved them.



According to the Lauritzen Garden's literature, other botanical gardens have peony collections, but few have an entire garden dedicated to peonies. Over one hundred eighty-eight peonies grow in the garden. Fifty-seven are tree peonies and 131 are herbaceous. The peony garden involves over three thousand square feet. Due to its focus on tree peonies, the peony garden at Lauritzen Gardens could be a delightful learning experience for anyone. It was for me.

The next time you find yourself in Omaha, visit the Lauritzen Gardens. I'm quite certain you will be glad you did. For more information regarding this great botanical garden visit www.omahabotanicalgardens.org/