



Rhododendron & Azalea News

Deer Resistant Plants: *Peonies!*

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(Photos by the Author – All Rights Reserved)



One of my earliest childhood memories of flowers were herbaceous peonies (*Paeonia lactiflora*). I was just 3 years old but I remembered those huge flowers and their wonderful fragrance. My father grew peonies and roses in our first home. We had white peonies with occasional red flecks, red peonies, and then got some pink ones, too. He did bring them to the new house my parents built in the Northern Virginia suburbs of Washington, D.C., when we moved in February of 1951. While my parents were preparing new flower beds for those plants, they gave me a place to plant my first garden. After 70+ years, I am still here and so are a few of those peonies.

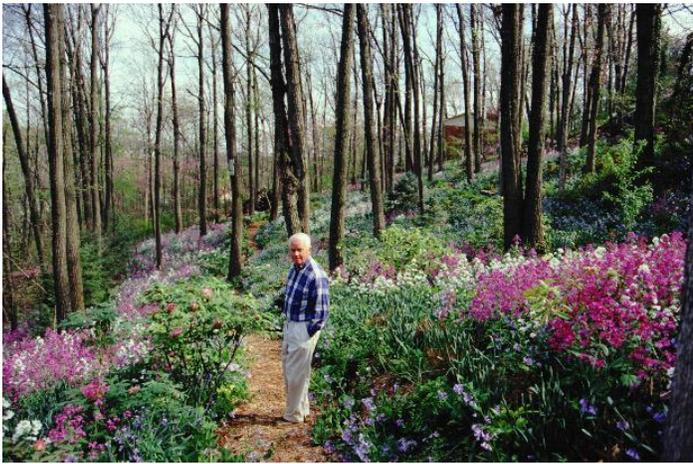


I became enamored with tree peonies (*Paeonia suffruticosa*) after attending a spring garden tour of the Middle Atlantic Chapter ARS. We visited Ron and Norma Brown of Harrisonburg, VA. Over many years, Ron created a 5-acre hillside garden that was floral perfection. He had azaleas and rhododendrons but also hundreds of mature tree peonies underplanted with a carpet of white *Trillium grandiflorum* and Virginia Blue Bells, *Mertensia virginica*. It was truly magical.

What amazed me is that Ron raised most of his plants from seed he collected from his few original plants. Trillium and tree peony seed can take 2 years to germinate and another 5 to 7 years to bloom. When I saw the vast expanse of trillium on that hillside (right), I realized Ron didn't let a single seed go to waste. He generously gave plants to the nearby Edith J. Carrier Arboretum at James Madison University and donated hundreds of tree peony seedlings to the 2016 ARS/ASA Convention plant sale we hosted in Williamsburg.



Tree Peony and Trillium



Pictured to the left is Ron in his garden. The tree peony images on this page are primarily plants in his garden or seedlings he gave me that I have flowered. I had purchased named tree peonies from commercial sources and paid nearly \$100 each. The seedlings I have raised from Ron are as good or better than most of those. He had huge peony flowers in a wide array of colors including white, blush pink, rose pink, deep pink, red, lavender, and purple. He had doubles and singles but he did not have any yellow tree peonies. Without a doubt, the massive trillium stand with scattered wildflowers on his hillside was the “show stopper.” Awesome!



These are images of some tree peonies in my own garden. Except for the two yellow tree peonies and the red, the others are Ron Brown seedlings. I have tried to tuck them in among some white species-type rhododendrons and azaleas. If you look closely, you may notice a few *Trillium grandiflorum* plants on the bank as well. I will never have a carpet of trillium like Ron but it will serve as a remembrance of his garden. The Carrier Arboretum does have a massivw trillium display thanks to Ron.





Herbaceous Peony 'Festiva Maxima'



Tree Peony 'High Noon'

Intersectional Hybrids

In recent years, there have been some exciting advances in peony hybridizing started by Toichi Itoh in Japan. He discovered how to cross tree peonies with herbaceous peonies to produce hybrids that have some of the best qualities of both groups. Since these wide crosses are between two sections in the Peony Family presumed to be incompatible, they are called "Intersectional Hybrids."

Many herbaceous peonies had beautiful flowers but relatively weak stems. When it rains, the open flowers usually become so heavy that the stems bend over and the blossoms end up in the dirt. On the other hand, tree peonies have woody stems which are much stronger and able to withstand adverse weather but they are woody shrubs. When the two are crossed, the hybrids act like herbaceous plants and die back to the ground during the winter but have much stronger stems that are able to hold the blossoms erect in rainy weather.

Another advantage of these intersectional hybrids is that Itoh was able to add a new range of colors to herbaceous-type peonies. There are now a number of yellow varieties as well as plants with other artistic hues. To me, 'Bartzella' is still the best and would be perfect if it just had fragrance. The American Peony Society has more info:

<https://americanpeonysociety.org/learn/itoh-peonies/>



Itoh Hybrid 'Bartzella' (plant)



'Bartzella' (flower)



Itoh Hybrid 'Sequestered Sunshine'



Itoh Hybrid 'Hillary'