



Tree Peony

Hello everyone, it's lovely to be back and I'm going to tell you today about some Chinese plants that we all can grow in our gardens because the news more from China now is about modern development and world position, rather than its horticultural delights

A century ago, the news would have been all about China's plants. Throughout the world there are various horticultural 'hot spots'; places that burst with wonderful genus and species that are just asking to be grown in our gardens. China is perhaps the supreme example of just such a 'hot spot'.

The discovery of Chinese plants really only began during the middle of the 19th century, prior to that only about ten or so plants had found their way to Europe via, mostly, the French Jesuit missionaries who were there from the 17th century onwards. One of the trees they discovered was the Tree Peony *Pæonia suffruticosa* a native of northern China but scarcely ever recorded in the wild, but it had been cultivated in China since at least the 7th century. It graced the imperial gardens. It was regarded as a symbol of Spring, and good fortune, and it was grown mainly for medicinal purposes, the root bark being used to treat blood disorders. It's still planted by the acre in the north of the country for this purpose. The plant was introduced into Britain in 1787 via Sir Joseph Banks who, apparently 'instructed several persons trading to Canton to enquire for it', although it was probably sent to him via the Jardin de Roi in Paris. Two years later a Dr. Duncan of the East India Company brought a living plant back with him to England, but that did not survive for long. But by 1794 seven of the beauties were on board the East Indiaman 'Triton' when encountering a storm she was dis-masted in the Channel and limped into port. The plants reportedly arrived in 'a shattered condition' but five of the peonies survived and gradually over the rest of the centuries different cultivars arrived, now there are about 150 different hybrids and cultivars available.

The flower of the Tree peony, if you don't know it, is to die for! They resemble a bush peony, but with more umph! They flower in late spring, so if you are going to plant one make sure you don't hide it away, and it can perhaps be seen from the house. They are hardy plants - but prefer an airy, reasonable, open situation. The plant begins growing very early in the year, so make sure that it doesn't get the early morning sun (it's similar to Camellias). The soil should be well drained and neutral to slightly alkaline. Clay chalk or sandy soil is fine, but do not let the roots dry out. That really is essential. Make sure you plant the bare rooted tree peonies deeply - most of them are grafted. That means they come true to form and the graft union should be at least 8cm (about 3 ½ in) deep. Tree peonies are heavy feeders, but avoid large doses of fast acting nitrogenous fertilisers. They don't like that. Don't give too much to

them. Give a top dressing of bone meal in the early autumn and a light sprinkling of a general fertilizer to buck them up in the spring. With luck and a bit of chatting up, your plant should be flowering within two years of planting. You enjoy it because they are wonderful flowers

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