



The *Brownii* Peony

Anne Oveson, Wallowa, Oregon



Flower of species *Brownii*, Oregon.

Photograph—Walter Good

I am an 86 year old widow with two hobbies—quilting and peonies. I chose quilting, but peonies chose me. My mother had a peony and my sister had a few. I started "collecting" peonies and had over 200 before I became interested in *Paeonia brownii*.

P. brownii is native to the northwestern US. They aren't very spectacular in appearance and in their native area; the plants die down fairly early in the year. I feel fortunate that in our 2,800 acres of timberland, at an altitude of approximately 2,900 feet, *brownii* grow very well over many acres.

We have thousands of *P. brownii* plants on our range land, but I didn't know about them until 1990. I had gone as far as 15 miles to see *brownii* plants on a neighbor's property and then discovered them right alongside the county road through our own property. *P. brownii* are difficult to see because they bloom with their faces bent to the earth. Once I learned how to spot them, I could identify them from quite a distance. I truly feel blessed that I have had unlimited access to *P. brownii* for nearly 20 years and I have enjoyed learning about them. The more I learned, the more I wanted to learn and that is when I started crossing *P. brownii* with *P. lactiflora*, *P. wittmaniana* and *P. peregrina*. My successes and failures have all been great experiences. Each spring, I eagerly await the successes and failures of the previous year's crosses.

P. brownii bloomed in our timberland in April 1995, even though the foliage was just showing March 20. We had had subzero weather with the snow still on the ground until February, so obviously, they respond quickly when the weather warms.

Galen Burrell was here May 5, 1995 and my notes show he collected *brownii* pollen. By May 22, 1995, I had pollinated EARLY WINDFLOWER (Saunders, 1939) with *P. brownii* pollen. Galen took some measurements, with plant height ranging from seven to eighteen inches. The number of leaves to a stem ranged from six to eleven. We found plants with branched stems twice at two locations out of ten. The stamen color was yellow. In several locations, the plants had five carpels, in others they had three and in one area, carpels ranged from one to eight. Petal centers were maroon, with a wider rim in one location, a darker maroon in one and a greenish-maroon red in another. Petal margins were nearly all yellow green and the sepals were green maroon to maroon and greenish pink to red. A fertilized carpel was brown. The eighth group had noticeably different leaves, longer pedicels; four-inch compared to approximately two-inch. The segments were more widely spaced with less serration; unique among all flowers seen.

On April 6, 2001, *P. brownii* were showing flower buds, but my lactiflora peonies were not all out of the ground. On April 25, 2001, the first *brownii* bloomed here at the house, while the first lactiflora bloomed on May 10.

P. brownii plants generally bloom two or three weeks or more before the lactiflora peonies, so I have had trouble trying to find *lactiflora* pollen to use on *brownii* plants. My own *lactiflora* pollen on *brownii* flowers produced seeds, but when the seeds came up the next spring, the roots turned brown and the plants died. That happened two years in a row. I then tried using *wittmaniana* and *peregrina* pollen on *brownii* plants and several of the seedlings lived. The flower set seed, but a heavy frost killed all of my early seeds.



Species 'Brownii' growing in the wild, Oregon.
Photograph—Walter Good

This year, I should have a lactiflora crossed with *P. peregrina* that produces a flower. Sadly, I am not sure that the *P. wittmaniana* seedling lived.

Peter Waltz and Melanie Shields were here in the fall of 1999 and although the *brownii* in the timberland were dead, the ones here at the house, where there is more water, were still living. The next year, I sent *brownii* pollen to Peter and he has many lovely crosses with various species of peonies. In early June of 2005, Hong Deyuan, head of the Institute of Botany of the Chinese Academy of Sciences and his wife, Kim Kaiyu, who is a noted botanist at the Institute, came to Wallowa with Paige Woodward (Chilliwack, British Columbia) to view *brownii* in their native habitat, as well as to study other plants indigenous to the Wallowa area. Unfortunately, the *brownii* in our timberland had all been eaten to the ground by deer and elk. We did, however, find a few farther north.

The next day, we all went to Granny's Viewpoint, which is located in what we call the "High Mountains". The elevation at Granny's Viewpoint is above 6,000 feet and with snow still on the ground because of the elevation, the *brownii* were just about halfway out of the ground. There were literally thousands and thousands of *brownii* plants. It was quite spectacular. The botanists also gathered specimens of other early plants. The Granny's Point season is long enough that *brownii* set all kinds of seeds. Jerry Hustafa of the US Forest Service does not know of any *brownii* growing at a higher altitude. He did note that the Nez Perce Indians harvested the roots for use in stomach ailments. I have read that they used them for lung ailments, also. (Wallowa County was the home of the Nez Perce Indians.)

THINGS I HAVE LEARNED

It is hard to see the flowers on *brownii* in their native habitat, because the stems are bent toward the ground and they are difficult to see from a distance.

It is easy to get flowers from *brownii* pollen crossed with lactifloras.

There is not very much pollen on a *brownii* flower. Consequently, it requires a lot of *brownii* flowers to harvest even a small amount of pollen.

When a *brownii* grows in an area where water is plentiful, one seed pod will produce as many as 50 seeds.

Ants really like *brownii* pollen. If there are ants where there are *brownii*, the ants will be in the flowers, harvesting the pollen.

Paeonia brownii do not live long in rich soil. They much prefer rocky soil. Some of their roots will go down as deep as 18 inches. I have given *brownii* plants to a number of people and the plants don't seem to live very long. One friend has kept one alive for eight years by keeping it right against a building where there is poor "gravel-ly" soil. I have never had one live that long.

Several flower books I have say that *brownii* flowers have five petals and one reported five to ten petals. However, I know that I learned to count differently than those authors, because no matter how many I have counted, I have always counted nine petals.

I used to think that animals would not eat *P. brownii*. We ran cattle on a piece of rental property and they never touched the five groups of plants there. However, the next year, different cattle were on the property and they ate the *brownii* clear to the ground. Deer and elk eat peonies, but I do not think they search them out.

"Regular" peonies are beautiful and wonderful and unique. When crossed with *brownii*, they become more beautiful and mysterious. Although time consuming and at times, unsuccessful, each "cross" is a great adventure.

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