



Woody Peony Groups

Harvey Buchite-Hidden Springs Flower Farm, Spring Grove Minnesota

Often incorrectly referred to as 'tree peonies', the woody peonies are actually relatively small shrubs and not trees. They are derived from crosses involving the woody shrub species found primarily in China and were grown for centuries in temperate Asia. This group is characterized by strong woody stems that are perennial in nature, meaning that they remain above the ground and re-sprout for several years. Flowers may vary from a few inches in species like *Paeonia delavayi* to over 9 inches in some of the named cultivars. Winter hardiness does vary in this group, in that, those hybrid tree peonies involving *Paeonia delavayi* (one color form called lutea) may show more winter die back than the large flowered group that are often referred to as the suffruticosa tree peonies. Plant height varies from three feet to ten feet tall and is influenced by the climate in which they are grown. Plants of the same variety may have heights being almost twice as tall in the Pacific Northwest as those grown in the Midwestern States. The reported growing heights may be misleading and should be taken as a general guide when placing them in the landscape. This woody peony cultivar group is the most tolerant of dappled shade, except for a few woodland herbaceous species. Protection from hot afternoon sun improves the life of the flowers, but the plants themselves prefer full sun.



Lutea hybrid 'Hephestos'

Lutea Hybrids. This group is often divided for horticultural purposes into several groups which we will point out here. The Advanced Generation Lutea Hybrids (AGLH) are most often the other parent involved in creating the peonies belonging to the Itoh group although so far one Itoh cross involving no *delavayi* (lutea) ancestry has been recorded. Lutea hybrids have lovely layers of colors expressing themselves differently as the flowers age. Flowers may have a base color of yellow overlaid with rose to give fiery orange tones and other variations. This sub-group is more often noted for winter die back of the stems, although they will bloom from stems produced from lower portions of the plant and on new ground shoots. Examples of this sub-group include, Golden Era, Alice Harding, Iphigenia, Pluto, Black Panther and the Gold Medal awardee Hephestos. A large number of cultivars in this group lack fertility, but new introductions are beginning to show increased ability to produce seed and pollen. Flowers may be partially hidden in the foliage, a trait inherited from the *P. delavayi* parent.



Lutea hybrid 'Black Panther'



Rockii hybrid 'Angel Emily'

Rockii Hybrids. The Rockii group involves *Paeonia rockii* in its background and is recognized by the dark, purple-black basal flares in the petals of the flowers. This group has been extremely winter hardy and produces an abundance of very large flowers in colors ranging from white to red and even purple with the distinct basal markings. The plants are often highly adaptable to variable climate conditions and may reach 7' feet in height in cold areas of the Midwest. They are large plants when mature and will require space in the garden or landscape. Fertility is often high in these plants, providing an opportunity for the gardener to create new forms. Some examples of this group include Rock's Variety, Angel Choir, Madame Marie-Therese Hermand, Baron Thyssen Bornemisza, Zi Hai Yin Bo, Lavender Hill and Angel Emily.

Suffruticosa Hybrids. The suffruticosa group is a collection of tree peony cultivars that involve several shrubby peony species that have been hybridized over the millennia. They may exhibit some characteristics of their *Paeonia rockii* heritage, but not so strongly as the above mentioned Rockii hybrids cultivars. There are cultivars in this group from China, Japan, Europe and America. All exhibit fairly good winter hardiness, strong growth and large flowers in colors from white to dark purple red and many clear colored pinks. The flower forms vary from single to nearly fully double. Pruning for this and the other groups is limited to trimming out the dead portions of the plant. This group is often propagated by grafting the newly matured stems in early fall onto herbaceous peony roots. The herbaceous roots used to graft woody peonies are referred to as nurse roots, providing the tree peony time to produce their own roots once planted in the garden. Grafted plants should be planted deeply so that a number of buds on the stem are located below the surface. There are a large number of peony cultivars in this group and have been grown successfully for many years in gardens throughout the Midwest. *P. suffruticosa* cultivars developed in China should be avoided in continental climates, as they were narrowly selected for conditions that cannot be replicated in most locations in the United States. Some examples of solid choices for the United States are: Shintenchi, Shimane Chojuraka, Hanakisoj, Kokamon, Kamata Fuji, and the striking red and white striped Shima Nishiki.



Suffruticosa hybrid 'Shima Nishiki'