

American Peony Society Media Backgrounder



The American Peony Society was established in 1903 to promote cultivated peonies and foster studies to improve their worth as a garden plant. The initial 37 members were commercial growers, hybridizers and collectors, mainly concerned about the proliferation of misnamed peony cultivars, inaccurate variety descriptions and poor quality introductions that were plaguing the booming peony market in the United States.

To that end, one of the first actions of the APS was to call for contributions of roots for a test plot to be developed at Cornell University's Experimental Station in Ithaca, New York. That first year some 3,500 roots were donated from 22 American growers and four foreign countries. By 1911 it was estimated that the APS had correctly identified, named and described 95% of all peonies of commercial value. In the process hundreds of peonies were judged to be worthless and were discarded.

Although the test plot project was abandoned shortly thereafter, the work of defining peony nomenclature continued, and in 1974 The American Peony Society was named the official international body for the registration of new peony cultivars.

Another major early effort by the fledgling society was a project to raise public awareness about peonies by staging annual exhibitions around the country. The initial events were held in the East in places like Boston, Philadelphia and New York, but soon reached out to cities in the Midwest like Detroit, Chicago and Cleveland. At the same time they grew in scope to become major public events. The 1923 exhibition in the Twin Cities of Minneapolis/St. Paul included a parade of floats that feature some 50,000 peony blooms that had been shipped on ice in railcars just for the event.

The exhibitions were held in great halls to accommodate the thousands of blooms to be judged in the annual flower show and the large crowds of spectators. The 1924 show in Des Moines drew 15,000 visitors.

The exhibitions are now part of the annual convention, which still include the flower show, along with peony-related seminars and garden tours.

As part of its educational efforts, the society has released a number of publications, starting in 1928 with "Peonies: Manual of The American Peony Society." A number of these publications are still available on the APS website. The society continues to send out a quarterly bulletin that keeps members abreast of the newest cultivars and provides information on up-to-date growing and hybridizing techniques, and highlights events at regional peony societies.

To give recognition to the best the world of peonies has to offer, APS gives out a number of awards. In 1926 it began recognizing the best bloom in the annual show with its Grand Champion Award as determined by show judges. The Gold Medal Award emphasizes the qualities important to most of the peony growing public. It takes into consideration such factors as availability, dependable performance, the lack of need for extra support, good plant habit, good foliage throughout the growing season and reasonable pricing. The Award of Landscape Merit is given after years of review by a special APS committee to peonies based on superior ornamental value, overall appearance in the landscape throughout the growing season and reliable performance across North America. Several awards or honors are also given to individuals for exceptional efforts in support of peonies.

The APS website, <http://americanpeonysociety.org>, provides easy access to a wealth of information about growing peonies, links to other related websites, current and upcoming society events, information on thousands of registered peony cultivars, a storefront for APS publications, and access to the society's seed exchange program. A Facebook page provides a place for sharing photos and information from gardeners and growers around the world.

The society's Seed Exchange Program enables APS members to share the genetics of potentially thousands of peony cultivars, including many hybrids and species. For a small fee, seed packets are available to members. The program also provides free seeds to organizations and institutions for educational or research purposes. Donated seed comes from APS members, both backyard hobbyists and collectors, as well as professional growers and hybridizers.

The American Peony Society has many hundreds of members scattered across nearly all 50 states and more than 20 countries. Membership cost is Go to <http://americanpeonysociety.org/membership/membership-online> to find complete membership information.