



Purpose a Product of History

The American Peony Society was established in 1903 to promote cultivated peonies and foster studies to improve its worth as a garden plant. That's a very general statement and just how the APS goes about achieving these objectives encompasses numerous disciplines and activities. The first order of business, at the beginning of the 20th Century, was to bring some order and standardization in the names of peonies and how they were marketed. There is more about this in the History of Registration Procedures by the American Peony Society, but the upshot is that the APS has served as the International Cultivar Registration Authority for peonies since 1974.

In the first half of the 20th Century, the Society was heavily influenced by cut flower interests. Until the advent of rapid air travel the peony enjoyed much success as a cut flower. Cut in bud, it could be stored under refrigeration for several weeks, and this allowed shipping by rail to distant major centers. Cut flower producers participated in the annual exhibitions, making them very competitive affairs. In 1936, Harry F. Little brought over three thousand blooms to the show, held in Toronto that year. The most coveted award in those days was that for Class No. 1: A collection of 100 blooms made up of not less than 80 different varieties. The awards won at these flower shows attested to the skill in growing, cutting, and showing peonies and thus were good marketing tools. Modern shows are more relaxed affairs with highest honors going to the one best peony in the show.



Members of the Society have, since its inception, made efforts to improve the peony through breeding programs. The goals up into the 1950s for the most part emphasized cut flower use and exhibition quality. There were always a few peony breeders who selected for garden and landscape use, but such peonies had difficulty in making a name for themselves on the show table and as a result had difficulty in competing for consumer interest. In more recent years, things have begun to turn around. As the average garden becomes smaller and there is the perception of less time available to garden, the interest in smaller and better behaved peonies is on the increase.

The educational component of the Society's mandate is met in part by the annual exhibition which offers a wide range of peony types and differing bloom periods all in one room. There are always many show visitors who remark that they didn't know all this variety existed. In addition, the Society has published a number of books covering various subjects. Perhaps the most notable of these, which has long been out of print, is "PEONIES: The Manual of the American Peony Society" published in 1928. It is still a very useful book (if you can locate a copy) because so many of the peonies described in it are still quite readily available today. The book provides an excellent record of peonies and their culture in the early part of the 20th century and includes some of the best available descriptions of 19th century peonies.

The Society's activities today continue many of those begun in the past, but there are also new ones to reflect the changing trends in peony gardening and interest. With a long and solid history on which to build, and with recent renewed enthusiasm, the future looks bright for both the Society and for the peony which it represents.