

Bill Seidl...Mr. Advanced Generation

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October 8, 2016, Bill Seidl, of Manitowoc, Wisconsin, passed away after a short battle with cancer. Bill's legacy will continue to live on in his influence on his former students: both in mathematics and horticulture. His self-taught garden skills helped him become a world recognized hybridizer of peonies and an ambassador of peony culture to colleagues from around the world. The American Peony Society recognized him in 2003 for his contributions to expanding peony horizons by presenting him with the A.P. Saunders Memorial Award. For many of us, we knew Bill for herbaceous peony cultivars like 'Carnation Bouquet', 'Pastelegance', 'Red Windflower', 'Vanilla Schnapps' and 'Pastelorama'. Or, perhaps, you recognize his work in the world of woody peonies; with cultivars like 'Anna Marie', 'Lavender Hill', 'Door County Sunset', 'Fuchsia Ruffles' or 'Autumn Harvest'. Bill's work with plants was far ranging and a life-long love which nearly everything revolved around. Bill was a productive breeder of advanced generation hybrids (both herbaceous and woody) and we jokingly called him 'Mr. Advanced Generation' which he did not mind. Most of all he will be remembered for his ambassadorship in the world of peonies, teaching and getting many people interested in his favorite genera of plants-peonies!

In 1968 Bill became interested in peonies while making a stop at the APS meeting in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. One of the first people he met was Silvia Saunders, who showed Bill a beautiful stem of 'White Innocence', hybridized by her father A.P. Saunders. Silvia made sure to introduce Bill to a number of peony people and he was hooked! For further information about Bill's journey with peonies, please see his article 'Close Encounters with Peonies and People'.

Bill's Garden (Friends)...One of the most magical places in northeast Wisconsin was Bill's garden lot in Manitowoc, Wisconsin. The garden lot, a one acre lot on the outskirts of town and approximately three miles from his home in town, was a botanical wonderland that included one of the widest range of plants in Wisconsin. More than the plant material within the lot, was the spell that it cast on its visitors-and there were many! The backbone plants in his lot garden were herbaceous and woody peonies, Magnolias, daylilies, Clematis and an assortment of other woody trees and shrubs-none of which were common place selections. These plants (and Bill) attracted all kinds of characters, some in search of simple beauty, others were heavy duty hybridizers in search of the most unique parental material and a number of people were friends looking for a good cookout and conversation. Chairs for socializing were always available for visitors under the gentle shade of magnolia and you could almost always find Bill there.

Through many years of attending APS meetings, correspondence, offsite garden visits, and chance, Bill amassed a large network of plant 'friends'. Dennis Ledvina, a Magnolia hybridizer, made annual trips to the lot to make crosses on Bill's trees and many of these seedlings are now available as named cultivars. Theresa Griesbach, a good friend of Bill's, visited a number of times each season to make peony crosses, enjoy conversation and collect seed to be grown at her garden. Numerous visitors quickly became 'peony converts'. Among these visitors was Kris Casey, a Manitowoc resident that for many summers would visit several days a week with her children. Over the years Bill named a number of woody peonies for Kris and her kids. Today, Kris' garden is filled with Seidl peonies. While the plants were certainly the initial draw, it was Bill's interesting stories that were the real magnet. For each plant that Bill grew, a story came with it. Bill loved plants, but he also loved history, language, art and culture. Plants were the conduit for all of these. Each plant in the garden had an origin, possibly a cultural tie, a name that perhaps had historical importance, and as plants go-an artistic tie. Scientific names were always great conversation fodder for origin, meaning and conjecture. Because Bill was stationed in Japan during his military assignment, a great many of his garden named plants had Japanese names. The Japanese language intrigued him

and he was always searching for that special name that had meaning and beauty. Oddly, Bill was partial color blind, thus many conversation revolved around color. I always found it amazing that so many of his cultivars have clear vibrant color-testament to his will careful work ethic.

Bill's network included many ground breaking peony hybridizers/growers that he freely traded information and plants with. Roy Pehrson, Chris Lanning, Al Rogers, Irene Tolomeo, Roger Anderson, David Reath and Roy Klehm were among the more recognizable plantsman he worked with. A number of the plants shared with Bill as seedlings were registered with his name and one of the above as the originator. Greenland (Pehrson/Seidl), Stallwart Rose (Lanning/Seidl), Garden Sunshine (Seidl/Rogers) and Pastel Splendor (Anderson/Seidl). This group of people provided a 'think tank' for hybridizing, obviously the exchange was a successful one.

Bill is probably best known for his herbaceous hybrids, but his real focus was the advanced generation lutea hybrids. In 30 years, some 250 numbered seedlings were produced and grown to flowering size. A few of these have been registered, many others served as hybridizing plants for future generations. A handful of people had worked with the lutea hybrids prior to Bill and he recognized the potential for improvement. Bill's hybridizing mantra was dream big and don't give up easily, it only takes one or two seeds to set a new direction. Early on Bill did just that, using Age of Gold as a seed parent and Chinese Dragon as a pollen parent. Age of Gold is a difficult seeder, but the offspring are almost always worth keeping. Chinese Dragon proved to be a very good pollen parent, which are a part of many of Bill's pedigrees. In 2000 he noted that the much work needed to be done with flower carriage and stem hardness. A dislike for the 'lutea hook' and fertility problems were big barriers in his mind. Fertility had increased with each generation, but it was still a long way from being easy in his mind, thus further work was necessary. As time went on Bill grew less and less of his own seed creations and by the year 2007 Bill stopped growing his own seed, due to space constraints (adult woody peonies take up lots of room).

From the mid 1980's to date Bill distributed much seed to interested parties worldwide. In the United States there were not many interested parties for woody peony seed, but in Australia and New Zealand a number of people wanted his rare crosses. He sent numerous large quantities of Rock's Variety x suffruticosa crosses and lutea hybrid seed to Bernard Chow in Australia and McFarlane, Irvine and Sutherland in New Zealand. All of these growers had very good growing climates for woody peonies and the seedlings grew quickly to flowering size. A large number of the Irvine/Sutherland seedling plants were registered in 2001. Sometime after this Roy Klehm imported a number of these plants to the United States. Due to this fortuitous importation, Visiting Klehm's hoop houses to see these in bloom was a highlight for a number of years. Roy was gracious and allowed Bill to gather pollen from the New Zealand plants to make more crosses at his Manitowoc lot. A number of these crosses are now growing in the fields at Solaris Farms and will begin blooming in the next year or two. In 2008 a similar event occurred when Stephan Tetzlaff of Germany volunteered to reunite some of the Bernard Chow hybrids with Bill. Most of these were not Bill's original crosses, but progeny of them. Bill, having run out of room at his lot kindly split the shipment between Theresa Griesbach and myself. As of this writing the 20 or so plants that Solaris Farms acquired are growing well and being propagated for further distribution.

Bill had many favorite woody peonies, but a few held special places in his mind. Theresa Anne (named for Theresa Griesbach), Fuchsia Ruffles, Mother Teresa and Anna Marie (named for his mother) were held in high regard. A number of times he stated that 'Bartzella' was his favorite peony, but later recanted due to it not being fertile! 'Bartzella' is an intersectional (Bill couldn't bring himself to using the APS accepted name for the group

'Itoh'-that's another story) peony hybridized by Roger Anderson and is a vigorous performer here in northeast Wisconsin and its easy to see why this would be a favored cultivar.

This past spring Bill was able to meet a number of APS members at his garden, during the convention, which was held in Green Bay. Later in the summer he shared with me that a visit by the members on Sunday of that week was one of the enjoyable times he'd had in recent memory. While Bill's gardens were on the decline, many outstanding peonies and plants remained and the group was able to see the fruits of a life-time of work and love.

Personally, Bill was responsible for getting me interested in peonies. In 2000, Kris Casey introduced me to Bill while on a visit to our farm (to look at daylilies). At the time I only grew three lactiflora cultivars and Bill informed me that I needed more peonies! At the time, I didn't really like peonies and was unaware of the vast array of plant habits and flowers within the genus. That changed rapidly as Bill quickly planned a grafting 'party' at our farm in August. We grafted 10 cultivars, 3 each and planted them in the field and covered them in plastic to heal. Unfortunately, the temperatures that August were very cold and all but 10 grafts grew. Bill had accomplished his task of hooking me on peonies, like so many others and I had new addiction-thanks Bill! The grafting 'party' became a yearly event with Bill and Kris Casey at the farm until 2014, when Bill became too immobile to travel easily. He later shared with me 'Nate, I'm glad that you've done so well grafting tree peonies, but I really never liked doing it. I'd be glad to come out and drink your tea and eat your snacks though'. Bill loved the social aspect, but not the labor-who could blame him.

In 2008, Bill asked me to propagate and distribute many of the cultivars he believed to be worthy. We spent many days digging and socializing at his lot each August and September over the years and I am still astounded by his generosity (not sure if my back would agree). His good will to the peony world is evident in many other's gardens as well and the plants will always be friendly reminders to share and distribute so all can enjoy and prosper.

His legacy will certainly live on in our garden and many other's worldwide. At this writing, I note that an image of 'Seidl's Super', a seedling grown and registered by Paul and Esther Simmons of New Zealand, appears on the front cover of the fall APS Bulletin. The Simmons had sent a division to Bill a couple of years ago and he grew it in his home 'select' garden. 'Seidl's Super' was a favorite of Bill's and in his last year of life Bill used it to produce large amounts of seed. Dream big and never give up! You'll be missed old friend.

More information about Bill Seidl and his work will be available in the coming registration descriptions of peonies he originated. Look for this in future APS bulletins.