

## What is a Peony?

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To most of us the Peony is a hardy perennial or small shrub (the tree peony), whose beauty and usefulness in the garden is second to none.

(To the more botanically minded, any peony is a member of some species, or a hybrid between two or more species, of the genus PAEONIA, which genus is in turn a member of the great family of plants known as the Ranunculaceae from ranunculus, a little frog, which includes the buttercup (the type), anemone, monkshood, larkspur and others whose flowers are often yellow.) Ed. Note: If we are going to publish botanical science information, then it MUST be current with botanical science. My reading in the field removed Paeonia from the Ranunculaceae by long ago. In that light, his information is long out of date in botanical taxonomy. Since mid 20th century the Genus Paeonia has been considered to be in a family of its own, Paeonacea. Either delete the paragraph or rewrite to be consistent with the botanical determination.

The name is derived from Paeon, a mythical physician, who was turned into the flower by the god, Pluto, to save him from death at the hands of his teacher, physician Aesculapius, who was jealous of his healing powers.

It was placed by the ancients among the wonders of the vegetable creation, possessing the power to relieve headaches, cure convulsions, prevent nightmares and remove obstructions from the liver. Planted by the door steps it kept away evil spirits. A small piece of root worn around the neck preserved the wearer from all kinds of enchantments. It should never be dug in the daytime or a green woodpecker would peck out the eyes of the digger. So goes the legend.

Its many species are found widely scattered through the Northern Hemisphere, though no wild form is native to Eastern North America. The following list of the various species, giving their color and approximate geographical distribution, is taken from the latest book on the subject, "Peonies of the World, Taxonomy and Phytogeography," by De-Yuan Hong, published by Kew Publishing, Kew Botanic Gardens, Kew, Richmond, Surrey, UK in 2010.

The genus is divided into three sections:

- 1) MOUTAN, embracing the 8 tree peony species which are: Rockii, Yananensis, Jishanensis, Ostii, Szechanensis and Qiui: white to rose pink; with a magenta blotch, edged red at the base of the petals, Northwest China and Tibet; Delavayi, dark red, and its subspecies lutea, yellow and potanini deep maroon red' and its variety trollioides, yellow, and Ludlowii, yellow; all natives of China and Tibet.
- 2) ONAEPPIA, having its petals and sepals the same length, composed of the only two (2) species which are both native to North America: Brownii, dark maroon, mountainous sections, California to Washington; and Californica, purplish, Southern California up to 4,000 feet elevation.
- 3) PAEONIA, which includes all herbaceous species found in Europe, Africa and Asia. This section is further divided into two subsections; with 7-8 distinct, groups and about 29 currently recognized different species. Here will be mentioned only the more prominent species with their color and distribution: Mlokosewitschi, yellow; Wittmanniana, yellowish and its variety, macrophylla, yellowish, all natives of the region between the Black and Caspian Seas; Cambessedesii, deep rose; and Russi, rose, Western Mediterranean islands; Mascula, red-rose, from England to Russia and south to Asia Minor; Daurica, rose red, Crimea, Asia Minor, Caucasus; Obovata, white to rose purple, Siberia, Manchuria, China, Japan; and its variety Willmattiae, white, China; Japonica, white, Japan; Arietina, red, Italy. Greece, Asia Minor; Broteri, rose, Spain, Portugal; Coriacea, rose,

Spain, Morocco, Algeria; *Lactiflora*, (syn. *albiflora*), white, Siberia, Manchuria, Mongolia, China, Tibet; *Emodi*, white, India, tallest of all; *Peregrina*, red, and its variety *lobata*, vermilion, The Balkans; *Officinalis*, red, Southern Europe; *Clusii*, white, Crete; *Humilis*, red, Spain and France; *Tenuifolia* (fern leaf), deep crimson, Bulgaria, Caucasus; *Anomala*, crimson, Russia, Central Asia; *Veitchii*, magenta, China, and its variety *Woodwardii*, magenta, Western China.

All species have only one flower to a stem except *Lactiflora*, *Emodi* and *Veitchii* and their varieties. The flowers are always single.

