

GARDENS

And Now, Let Us Ponder a Paeon to Peonies

SOME FLOWERS just aren't poetic. Some flowers just are.

For instance, to my way of thinking, thistles aren't poetic.

To begin with, thistle isn't a very romantic word. Thistles are pretty enough but they're too prickly. On the other hand, roses are prickly but they ooze poetry. This is due to their fragrance, grace and beauty. And rose is a lovely word.

Andromeda isn't poetic. Elephant ears are striking but they're not the stuff of iambic pentameter either. And you can argue with me but the same goes for gladiolas.

But peonies — hah, if you want poetry, my pick is peonies. I know this is all very subjective but as far as I'm concerned, they're easily up there with roses. Who cares that peony doesn't rhyme with very much? Peonies are gorgeous and sweetly majestic and as I see it, they absolutely epitomize poetry.

Even the name has a certain cachet. There are a number of peony legends

but the basic belief is that the flower's botanical name, *Paeonia*, stems from Paeon, a physician of the gods. Paeon shows up in the Iliad healing wounds with herbs that thicken the flow of blood. A nice offshoot is that another Greek healer, Asclepius, was jealous of Paeon and was planning to do



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him in. So Zeus saved Paeon by changing him into the flower that bears his name.

It's a nice story, and you can take this anyway you want but peonies are fairly long-lived — 20 to 30 years is not uncommon and some have been said to survive for as much as a century. The Roman philosopher Pliny the Elder, who was also a naturalist, wrote that the peony plant cured 20 ailments, including jaundice, stomach pains and tracheal problems. It was even credited with preventing nightmares.

And there's yet another myth, which sounds a little soap opera-ish. The plot line here is that Apollo was trying to dazzle a shy but beautiful nymph named Paeonia, when Aphrodite caught them together. Paeonia blushed with embarrassment and the color stayed on her face when the furious Aphrodite changed her into a peony. I can just see Susan Lucci playing a jealous Aphrodite.

This is a good time to talk about peonies because they can be planted in the coming weeks to bloom next spring. And what blooms! In my garden, we had our best peony show ever this season. Of course, maturity



Newsday Photo / Irene Virag

The late Henry Mitchell wrote lovingly of double-flowered peonies, such as these, likening them to dahlias transformed in heaven.

probably had something to do with it. We planted them three years ago and this was the first season of real magnificence. They were white and pink and red and exceedingly lush. They easily rivaled the roses.

Peonies, of course, have been poetic for a long time. They're old-fashioned flowers. I never met a grandmother who didn't like peonies.

Peonies have ancient roots in China, where the plant has long been used for healing. The Chinese considered the tree peony the queen of flowers, symbolizing love and reverence. Closer to home, Thomas Jefferson, the gardener's president, raised peonies. In his garden journal of 1771, he mentioned the "piony" as one of the perennials growing at Monticello. And my hero, the late Henry Mitchell, really understood the poetry of peonies — as well as most flowers.

He wrote that old-fashioned double-flowered peonies were "like dahlias that have gone to heaven and been transformed."

There are a lot of peonies to pick from. There are more than 30 species in the genus *Paeonia* and at least 3,000 registered cultivars, although only 1,300 are commercially available. Most modern peonies are hybrids of the pink and white beauties, *Paeonia lactiflora*, the Chinese peony, and *P. officinalis*, the common peony.

Modern peonies come in single- and

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double-flowered forms, and their showy flowers range from 2 to 8 inches in diameter. They have saucer, cup or bowl shapes, and the colors include red, pink, white, yellow, coral and peach. There are even bicolored cultivars and anemone-shaped or Japanese-style peonies such as Bowl of Beauty with carmine-pink petals cupping a froth of creamy ivory-white petaloids.

Tree peonies, which are really shrubs with woody stems that don't die back in the winter, have the biggest blooms of all — their mostly

double, sometimes frilled or ruffled flowers approach a diameter of 12 inches.

Like I said, this is a good time to start pondering peonies and making your choices. If you plant them next month, there's a chance you'll even have a few blooms next spring to bring poetry to your garden. Pick a sunny spot — maybe this has something to do with Apollo and his shy nymph — and dig a hole about a foot and a half deep and slightly wider.

Since peonies seem to live as long as oak trees and they don't like to be transplanted, make sure their new digs are roomy enough. Throw in some compost and a few handfuls of bone meal. One last thing — don't bury the growth eyes, the pink buds on the thick root, more than 2 inches deep.

You'll be delighted. I love the pointed rosy pink shoots that push up in the spring. Even before the flowers appear, they form stanzas in my mind.

It's hard to be sad when you see peonies. John Keats knew this. He rhapsodized about the peony as an antidote to melancholy. "But when the melancholy fit shall fall / Sudden from heaven, like a weeping cloud . . . Then glut the sorrow on a morning rose! Or on the wealth of globed peonies."

Like I said, some flowers are poetic and some flowers aren't. Peonies are pure poetry. •