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**PREMIER  
ISSUE**

## STARTUPS & UPSTARTS

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## The other summer flower festival

Lilac Festival fans also may want to make a road trip to Pavilion to see the tree peonies of Linwood Gardens

By Jane Milliman

About a thirty-mile drive southwest of Rochester near little town of Pavilion, there's a place called Linwood Gardens—a romantic old estate that inspires visitors and garden lovers lucky enough to find it to return year after year.

Those familiar with that part of the world already know about its soaring views and wide-open vistas, and Linwood does have a terrific vantage point high above gorgeous farmland.

But there's a lot more.

When a few Linwood fans are asked to name their favorite thing about the place, the answers were enthusiastic and varied: "That old pool are the bell that you'd ring so you didn't come upon anyone naked," "all of the beautiful sculpture," and "the tree peonies, of course!"

The tree peonies, of course, are Linwood's main attraction. In the 1930s, Linwood was a hotbed of their breeding, thanks to efforts led by William (Bill) H. Gratwick III at the nursery he started there called Rare Plants, Inc.

Gratwick's grandfather had made a fortune in lumber, and the family lived in a mansion, since destroyed, in Buffalo. In 1899, Gratwick's father, also a successful businessman, decided he wanted a summer house and traveled by train and on foot from Buffalo in all directions looking for the perfect spot. He found it on York Road in Pavilion, bought up four farms totaling around 350 acres, and constructed his dream home.

The big country house was never meant for year-round living. It has large fireplaces for taking the chill off, but no central heating. It was a vacation home, built for relaxation and enjoying life. There were tennis courts, the swimming pool, a formal enclosed garden, sprawling lawns, and lots of woods to explore.

One practical feature was a one-acre walled fruit and vegetable garden with big wooden gates, but even there, under the grape arbor at the rear, was a tiny, whimsical fish pond.



Tree peonies are but a few species of flowers on display at the historic Linwood Gardens estate. This year, the Tree Peony Festival will be held the last three weekends in May.

There are also plenty of outbuildings, including a little chapel and a gardener's cottage where, in 1933, Bill Gratwick moved his family from Buffalo to live year-round.

Gratwick was an educated and intelligent person who was very engaged in life. He studied landscape architecture and is known for his work with tree peonies, but he also bred cold-hardy boxwood—the place is covered in them—and animals. Gratwick was a sculptor and there are many of his works, mostly representing plant forms, in the Linwood landscape. Artists and musicians flocked to the place.

There were the photographers Ansel Adams, Walt Chappell, and Minor White (who later returned to Rochester to head up the George Eastman House and teach at the University

of Rochester), poet William Carlos Williams, and author Wyndham Lewis.

Nassos Daphnis, who came to paint the peonies, fell in love with them and joined in the breeding program at the nursery. The two plantsmen, along with their mentor, Hamilton College professor A.P. Saunders, are considered top breeders in the history of the tree peony.

A rare plant nursery doesn't make the kind of money needed to keep up a grand estate, and after Bill Gratwick took over, the place started to decay. The pool, the roof, and the pipes all leaked. The formal garden was "weeded" by sheep and contained plants only deer wouldn't eat. In his 1965 autobiography *My, This Must Have Been a Beautiful Place...*

### tree peony growing tips:

Like all peonies, tree peonies are susceptible to fungus and care must be taken to remove all dead and diseased tissue and debris at the end of the season.

They prefer rich, well-drained soil.

Tree peonies can fall prey to a wasp that makes its home in open stems.

Apply Tanglefoot, a sticky insect trap, around wounds.

Site the plants so that they are protected from strong winds and direct afternoon sun, but so that they still get enough light to blossom well, at least half a day.





# Grow | Plant Life

*When it Was Kept Up*, Gratwick wrote, "There came a time in the thirties when circumstances had become so strained and straightened that we almost came face to face with reality."

Unable to pay for staffing and without the manpower to do it all themselves, the family decided to sell. But it was the Depression, the location is very remote, and a buyer could not be found. The Gratwicks stayed, and the condition of the place continued its decline.

In 1973 a fire destroyed much of the main house. In 1988 Bill Gratwick died and his daughter Lee Gratwick took up residence in the gardener's cottage and oversight of the property.

Since that time, Ms. Gratwick's strong design sense, hard work, and able management have made the ruin into a showpiece of a different kind. Only a few rooms downstairs are usable, but they are restored and airily beautiful. The wooden exterior is aged to perfection. With the help of family and friends, walks have been rebuilt, walls and water features repaired, perennials planted and boxwoods trimmed. What was once a tennis court is now a labyrinth.

Most impressively, tree peonies have been freed from the nursery and planted all throughout the grounds. When they bloom in late May and early June, it's an amazing sight. The flowers are huge and appear in colors from pure white through yellow, orange, pink, red, and purple. The plants themselves are substantial woody shrubs, many of the mature specimens being five feet or taller. Tree peonies don't have as strong a scent as the common herbaceous variety, but they make up for that in pure wow factor.

The estate is open to the public for the Tree Peony Festival three weekends a year. It's a chance to explore the site, picnic on the lawn, take in the view and gawk at the peonies—you'll want some for your own garden, and while there are only a select few for sale on the grounds, Palmiter's Garden Nursery in nearby Avon has extensive offerings and there are good online sources as well.

Even people who don't care about plants can't help but fall under the spell of Linwood Gardens. Visit just once, then mark your calendar for next year. [More](#)

*Jane Milliman is the publisher of the Upstate Gardeners' Journal, which she founded in 1995. She is also the garden columnist for the Democrat and Chronicle and a freelance garden writer and photographer.*

**Linwood Gardens**  
1912 York Road  
Linwood, NY 14525  
585-584-3913  
2013 Tree Peony Festival of Flowers  
May 11-12, 18-19, 25-26  
10 a.m.-4 p.m.  
Suggested contribution: \$8

Photos by Jane Milliman

