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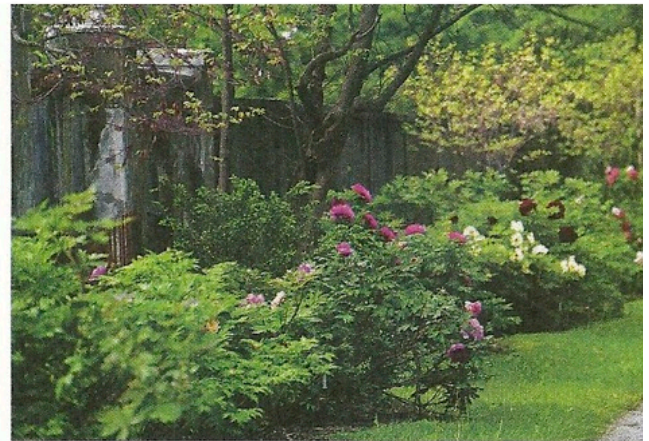
# Worth *the* Wait

When 500 tree peonies unfurl their frothy petals at Linwood Gardens, the scene is like nothing else on Earth.

Country Gardens Summer 2011

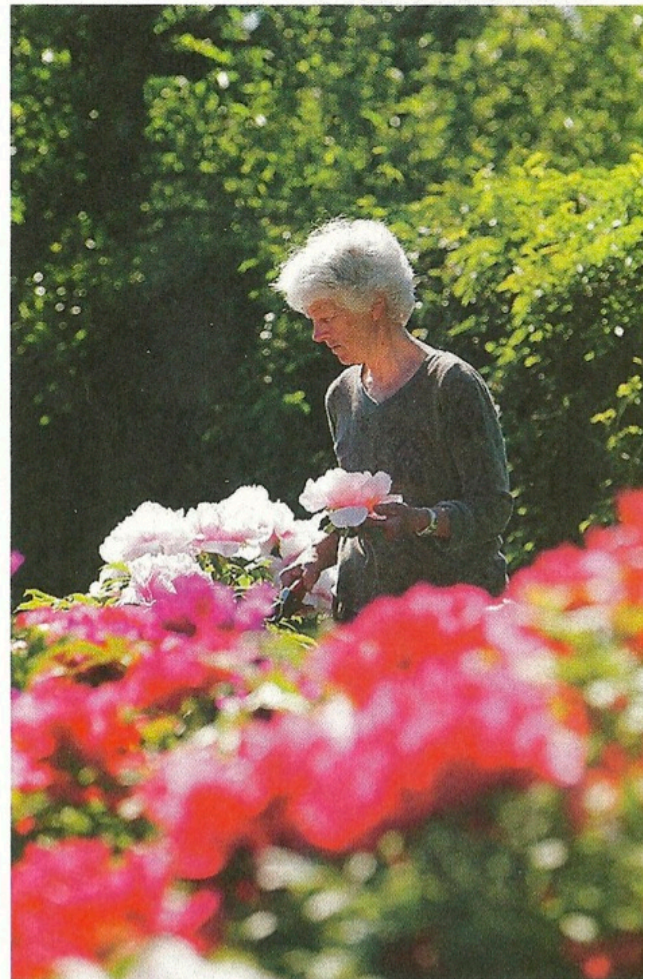


Tree peony 'Gessekai'



Your life changes when you ease the car around the bend and suddenly fall into step with Linwood Gardens' grand procession of 75-year-old tree peonies, each bearing opulent flowers sparkling in the sunlight. The panorama unfolds near Rochester, New York, at Lee Gratwick's home, a dreamlike estate with roots plunging back to Lee's grandfather. Perhaps you thought you knew tree peonies. But these graceful, woody trees stand 5, sometimes even 6, feet tall and spread equally wide in a statuesque frill of deeply cleft leaves. Multiply the magic by nearly 500, because that's how many tree peonies Lee has in her collection. Add the brushstrokes of lissome, flounced, chiffon flowers—cradled in woody branches wherever you turn. Surely you've never seen shrubs like this before. But it's not the immensity of the plants or the size of the flowers that really blows you away. It's the colors. These are tree peonies of a totally different hue. They bear smoldering, fiery, deeply suffused combinations of shades inlaid into the depths of crinkly petals. Everywhere, Linwood is awash in a spectrum that forges a new frontier.

**Opposite:** A pretty pink Chugai seedling grown from seed at New York's Linwood Gardens. **Above right:** Lee Gratwick lined up a procession of peonies in front of the former vegetable garden wall. **Right:** Lee wades among tree peonies in the trial garden. **Below:** Burgundy tree peony 'Thunderbolt' explodes in front of the toolshed.



Tree peony 'Impumon'

The flowers are surreal but part of the fairy tale is Linwood's setting. In 1901, Lee's grandfather, financier William Gratwick II, drew a circle 60 miles from Buffalo to pinpoint the crest of a hill in Pavilion, New York, for the site of his grand country estate complete with walled gardens and strong architectural lines. That was the scene Lee's father, William Gratwick III, inherited when he opened his rare plant nursery.

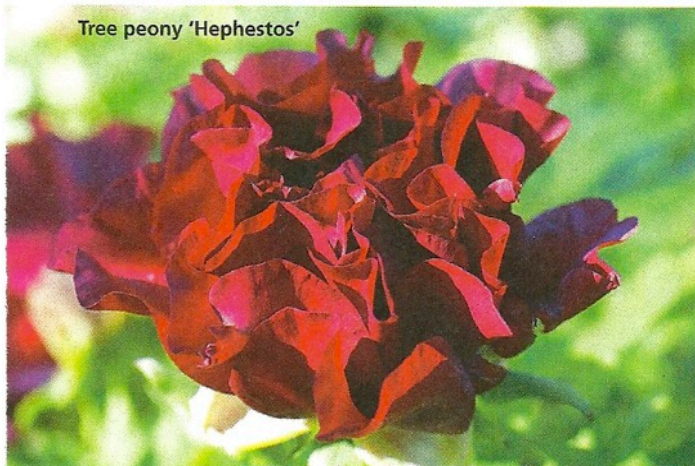
Meanwhile, in Europe, tree peonies—thus named for their woody stems, so different from their herbaceous kin—were gaining momentum. Cultivated in their native China for hundreds of years before traveling to Japan in the 8th century, tree peonies were venerated in the East. The Chinese version focused on flouncy, pom-pomlike, countless-petal blossoms, the trade-off being that they often nod under the sheer weight of their magnificent blooms. In Japan, the emphasis was on creating a legacy of simpler, open-face, less hefty blossoms but sturdier stems. These eventually arrived in Europe about 1844 but didn't translate to America until the late 1920s when the yellow tree peony *Paeonia lutea* caught the eye of A. P. Saunders, a chemistry professor who lived not far from Linwood. He began importing Japanese Moutan tree peonies and crossed them with the new yellow introduction, creating the first American tree peony hybrids.

But Lee's father was a sculptor as well as a nurseryman. That's why Nassos Daphnis, a young Greek artist, was invited to visit Linwood in the 1930s when the tree peonies were in full pop. Transfixed

**Right:** The Japanese collection of tree peonies basks under a *Ginkgo biloba* tree beside Linwood Gardens' lily pond. Not far away, 'Hephestos' (a Daphnis hybrid) begins to unfurl. Linwood stewards several groups of tree peonies, including Japanese tree peonies such as magenta 'Horakumon' and frilly, pure white 'Suisho Haku' (translated as 'Crystal Palace').



Tree peony 'Suisho Haku'



Tree peony 'Hephestos'



Tree peony 'Isadora'

## Plant at a glance: Tree peony

**Latin name:** Complex cultivars using *Paeonia suffruticosa*, *P. delavayi*, and *P. lutea*

**Exposure:** Light sun with shelter from hot midday beams

**Height:** Although tree peonies are slow to gain stature, they will eventually become 5- to 6-foot-tall shrubs.

**Hardiness:** Zones 4–8; tree peonies require three to six weeks of freezing, or just above freezing temperatures to flower impressively.

**Conditions:** Furnish well-drained, friable soil with generous organic matter. Mulching is helpful.

**Planting:** Tree peonies prefer fall transplanting, but when purchased in containers, they can be planted in early spring and throughout the growing season. They are sold as grafted plants, so be sure to bury the graft below the soil surface to encourage it to initiate its own roots.

**Watering:** Tolerant of brief

droughts, tree peonies only require supplemental water during prolonged dry spells.

**Fertilizing:** Rather than adding fertilizer, it is preferable to grow tree peonies in a fertile soil fortified by compost and organic matter.

**Flowers:** Outrageously gorgeous, immense blossoms unfold in May or June depending upon your region and the season. Tree peonies blossom before herbaceous peonies and remain prime for a week or longer in typical cool spring weather.

**Colors:** The color range is incredibly broad, and subtle variations on yellow, salmon, orange, pink, magenta, and burgundy have been achieved.

Tree peonies hit places in the spectrum that no other flower has attained.

**Beware:** Susceptible to disease when injured, care should be taken when cutting flowers to "seal" the wound with wax.

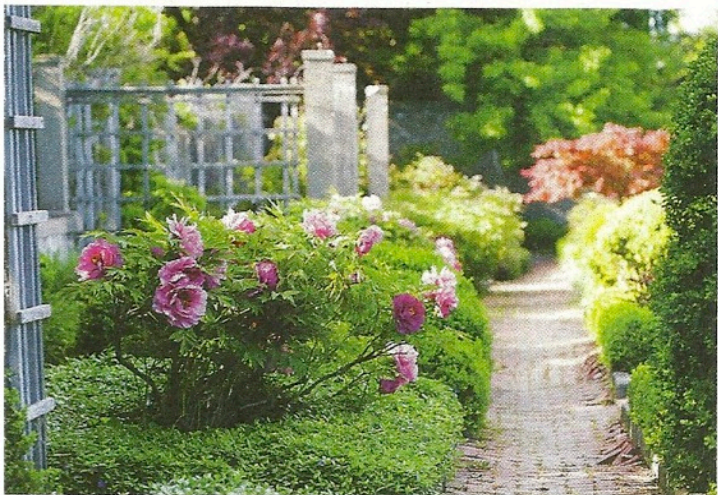
and seduced, Daphnis picked up a brush—not only to paint, but also to bring pollen to pistils. Daphnis' singular tree peonies bear the names of Greek gods and famous artists; they display an unprecedented stature and majesty. The colors are transcendent.

That was the dawn of American tree peonies. Although other hybridizers entered the ring later, Linwood's collection emphasizes the early work in the field. Lee stewards the prototypical Moutan Japanese collection of tree peonies used as parents for the work done by her father and his colleagues. These have simpler flowers and less complicated colors, and also blossom a week or two earlier than the American hybrids. The flowers in A. P. Saunders' line feature the new combinations of yellows and reds displaying distinct hybrid vigor.

And Lee's father introduced a series of immense tree peonies bearing lusty, tissue-thin flowers with wavy, almost winged petals and gradations of color seeping from the center of each petal to its edge. The Nassos Daphnis hybrids are voluptuous with singular colors that defy categorization—"the word painterly comes to mind," Lee says. When all those facets combine, the effect is palpating.



Tree peony 'Pluto'



Tree peony 'Shimane Cho Juraka'



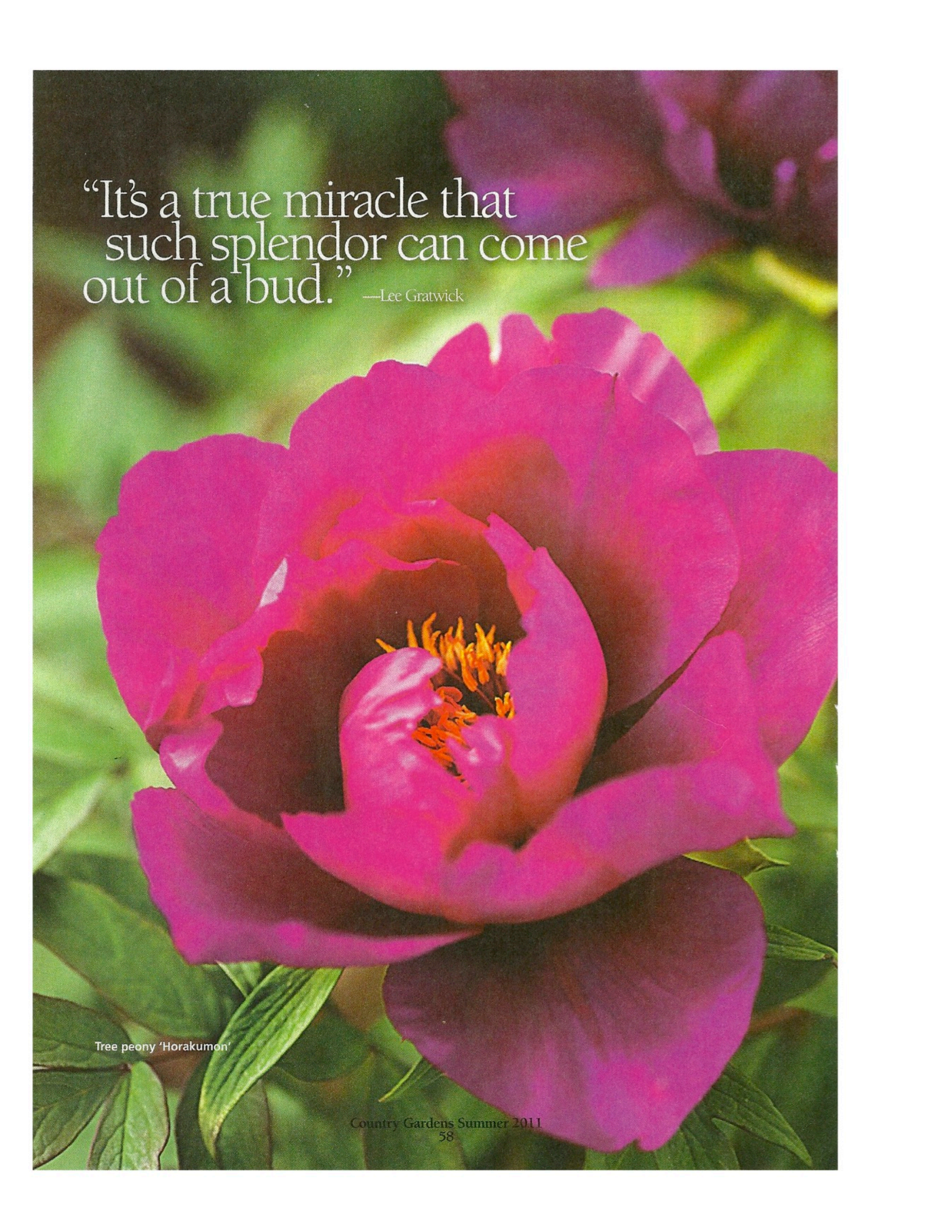
Tree peony 'Tria'

When Lee came home to Linwood in the 1980s to take over the family's estate, she revamped the overgrown property and added her own vision to the compendium. "My focus was on preservation," she says, "but also on sharing. I wanted to overlay, not to erase." Lee was given a nursery, but she took the mature tree peonies and infused them into the garden thoughtfully and effectively.

So Linwood's seduction lies not only in the parade of tree peonies themselves; its allure is also in the harmony of integrating these majestic shrubs into the big scene. The tree peony extravaganza lasts only a few weeks in May and June, but transience is intrinsic to the trees' wonder, in Lee's estimation. "They aren't forever, but their fleetingness is part of the mystique," she says. They are worth the wait. One day, Lee is hoping gardeners will be inspired to follow the lead at Linwood to include these most poetic plants in every type of garden. ■  
*For more information, see Resources on page 102.*

**Above:** Daphnis hybrid 'Leda'—in Linwood's Italian Garden—is one of the most popular tree peonies in the United States. **Opposite and top:** Daphnis hybrids often merge brushstrokes of color, such as the hint of wine in 'Isadora' and the black heart of 'Pluto'.

For a complete gallery of Linwood's tree peonies, go to [BHG.com/treepeonies](https://www.bhg.com/treepeonies)



“It’s a true miracle that  
such splendor can come  
out of a bud.” —Lee Gratwick

Tree peony ‘Horakumon’