

University Finnerly Garden Friends

April 2012 Newsletter

Dear Friends, our wonderful editor, Sam, starts early getting us organized for the next issue—this is being written for the April issue—and I have just finished reading the January issue! Sam makes sure we keep our noses to the grindstone! And talking of our editor, he turns 90 in March and I would like to say “bless you” and to thank him for the wonderful contribution he has made to the Garden Friends. He is a very special person.

Now I am trying to decide whether spring is here or whether we will have a final cold spell. My Galiano garden is well ahead with many plants in bloom. It has been a very good year for hamamelis—my H. ‘Pallida’ has been blooming since Christmas and gives me pleasure every time I sit down to eat a meal. H. ‘Arnold Promise’ is in full bloom and fills the back garden with scent—it makes even pulling weeds a pleasant occupation. This has been a good hellebore year, and I always look forward each spring to the first blooming of the young seedlings. I now have two doubles—a dark purple and a paler pink lilac—both are lovely. And there are still more of the young ones yet to bloom. Some of the rhododendrons have been blooming spasmodically since November and are now getting their main spring blooming organized—I think particularly of ‘Rosamundi’ (which as Harold Greer maintains, should really be ‘Christmas Cheer’). The early crocus and the snowdrops make bright patches of colour and the *Anemone blanda* are just starting to bloom. The clumps of yellow English

primroses are at their best and I expect to find the early daffodils showing yellow when I get back to the island.

I have been weeding and cleaning out the vegetable garden and was very surprised to find that the lettuce in open beds had survived the cold weather. And I am still eating my own potatoes, carrots, beets, leeks, squash and chard. Truly we do live in a wonderful part of the world. Now I am planning where things will go this year and shortly will be trying very early sowings of the hardier vegetables. And the rhubarb is up and is, I am sure, relishing its new top dressing of well rotted horse manure.

As you know, I do all my garden watering using water from the roofs which I store in tanks placed around the property—every building has its collection of tanks. This year is the first I can remember when a number of the tanks are still empty half-way through February. It has been a very dry winter and that spells problems for people on wells. Some of the island aquifers will be in trouble, and that is a problem because the salt water can invade wells when the pressure in the aquifer is allowed to drop. I use my well only for house usage and all my garden watering is done with collected water.

Don't forget the giant Plant Sale at UVic in May—look for the splendid collection of plants grown on from some of Finnerly's prize possessions. I hope to see you there.

Betty Kennedy

Tree Peonies: 2. The large flowered group

M.J. Harvey

The large flowered tree peonies are the most decorative and prized of all the peonies but they are surrounded by an aura of mystery and complexity in the West largely because of some historic misunderstandings made at the time when they were first introduced into Britain.

In addition, the uncertainty surrounding the 'correct' scientific names has been further exacerbated by the obstinacy of some Western taxonomists in sticking to a very narrow interpretation of the rules of nomenclature. A further complication is that exploration and new information was cut off from the West for over 60 years by the sequence of World War 2, the Chinese Revolution and the Cold War. This prevented the reassessment that the group so urgently needed. We were left to reshuffle the fragmentary information gathered in the 1920s and '30s and stare at the inadequate plant material that was in gardens.

It was not until 1990, following the end of the Cold War that travel restrictions were relaxed permitting travel in the interior mountains of China. As a result there is now possible a modern synthesis of how the tree peonies arose and what their origins were. In this the Chinese have largely led the way.

I shall attempt a little historic tour of peony history in the following two or three articles, describing the early events of their initial introduction into cultivation in 7th century China; their subsequent spread and popularity; the urgency that the English put into getting living specimens to 18th century Britain; the wild species that have been recognised so far; and finally some of the genetic factors which made the original wild plants auto hybridise as soon as they were dug up and grown in the early Chinese gardens. I shall also point out that present day gardeners need a little genetic knowledge when growing plants from seed to avoid the error of assuming that the seedlings will resemble the seed parent. It ain't necessarily so! I shall show how to avoid these problems.



It is most likely that the earliest use of tree peonies in China was as a component of herbal medicines. The plants are dug up, the roots dried and slices incorporated into the mixtures

used to brew medicinal teas. The Chinese name for tree peonies is moutan and this name appears to date from very ancient times. The two character name translates as 'male red (flower)'. Moutan is still used in Chinese herbal medicine.

The Tang dynasty, 618–907 A.D., had its initial centre in the central mountains and provided the first records of the cultivation of tree peonies. The Tang emperors conquered land from the local tribes resulting in a period of stability and wealth (at least for the emperor and court). This produced a golden age when music, poetry and other arts flourished. By contrast Europe was in the Dark Ages.

Palaces were built for the emperor and around them the gardens were developed. It can be safely assumed that wild peonies were dug up from the surrounding hills and grown in these gardens. Now gardeners are a curious and competitive bunch and it can also be assumed that this applied in ancient times. Plants which were rare or unusual would have been at a premium and competed for. Thus collectors would have ranged far and wide over the mountains searching for that something different.

Plants with multiple petals attract attention and would have been in demand, unusual colours also. Eventually seedlings from garden plants would have been raised to supply a greater quantity of plants and many of these seedlings would have been hybrids between the different geographical sources of peonies now planted side by side in the gardens.

I am not implying that the Chinese were great geneticists, the hybrids arise automatically when plants from differing populations are grown next to each other. I shall discuss the mechanism (self incompatibility) later, it controls much of what happens in peonies. What the gardeners of the time had, was what we would now call a hybrid swarm from which they were able to select the best seedlings with larger, more colourful and more double flowers. They did not have to know this but in hindsight, it enables us to explain the rapid rise of moutan cultivation in China.

Over time the royal court relocated to a more easterly region taking moutan culture and the prestige associated with it—a prestige that peonies have never lost in China. The first

treatise and catalogue on the moutan was written in the 11th century, many forms were described and moutan cultivation became widespread. With the spread of Zen Buddhism to Japan the moutan (rendered 'botan') was eagerly accepted and breeding in Japan developed slightly differently there, although the old idea that the Chinese preferred heavy double flowers and the Japanese lighter more open blooms is not true. The Chinese called tree peonies Hua Wang—the King of Flowers—and images were widely used on scrolls, porcelain, bronzes and silk. The deciduous peonies were downgraded as the King's ministers. It was through the China trade that the Europeans first learnt of the existence and beauty of the tree peonies.

The majority of tree peonies in North America are derived from Japanese stock because of a lack of trade with China during the Cold War. There is also a current ban on plants from China from a fear of the introduction of plant diseases.



The English, a nation of gardeners, knew about tree peonies; after all, the flowers were displayed on the expensive porcelain, scrolls, etc., that were so highly prized by their owners. If only, if only they could get hold of a living plant, but there were none. The problem was in maritime trade. We are talking 18th century. Ships sailed regularly to the Far East, but they were slow. Plants kept in the hold rotted from the heat and humidity; plants on deck died from salt spray and heat. This was before the development of the high speed clipper ships and the invention of the Wardian case (a mini greenhouse).

Halfway between London and Hampton Court Palace on a bend in the River Thames is a small boat landing at a former royal deer park. It is suggested that the French for "landing"—quai, quay pronounced "key" was corrupted to Kew. Contrariwise, Oxford Place Names prosaically has it named for John De Caiho, Sheriff of London 1201.

Whatever the origin of its name, Kew became a place for the British royals to relax, have picnics, get away from the city and, more pertinently, garden. King George III was probably

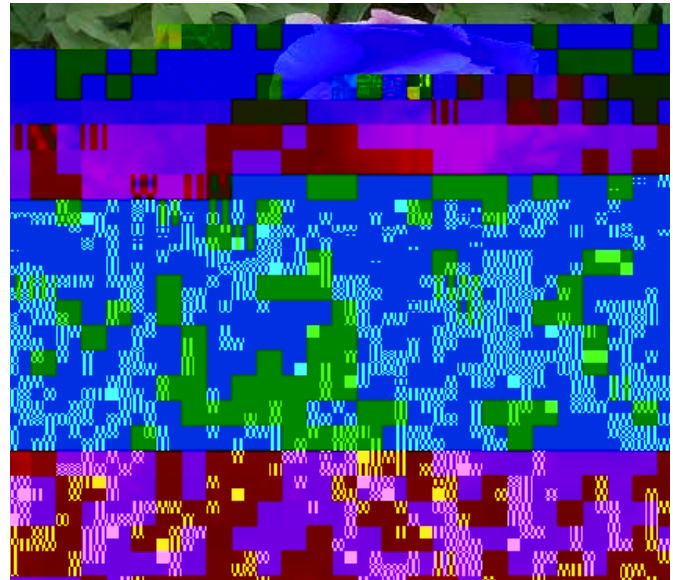


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the most intelligent monarch the British ever had and was interested in science and exploration. One of his advisors was Sir Joseph Banks who had accompanied James Cook on a voyage to chart Newfoundland and later he was on the Endeavour during Cook's first voyage round the world, 1768–71, to observe the transit of Venus from Tahiti (needed to calculate the distance of the Earth from the Sun). Banks was later President of the Royal Society for over 40 years.

Britain, one could say, was in its own Golden age—Handel, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Wedgwood—and was developing a taste for taking over other people's countries. Banks was in the confidence of the royal court and, with encouragement, proceeded to build up Kew as a botanic garden, which it has continued to be to this day.

George III was not particularly interested in plants, his interests were in improved farming techniques—hence "Farmer George"—and he kept a flock of merino sheep, smuggled out of Spain, on his farm across the road. But the ladies were very much into plants (and building follies) and gave the greatest encouragement to Sir Joseph to obtain rare

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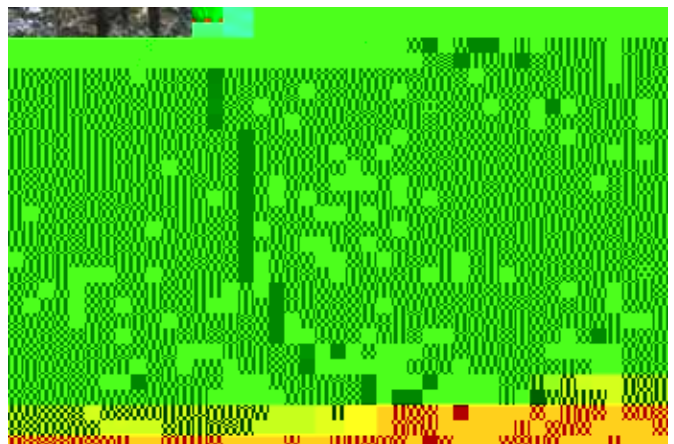
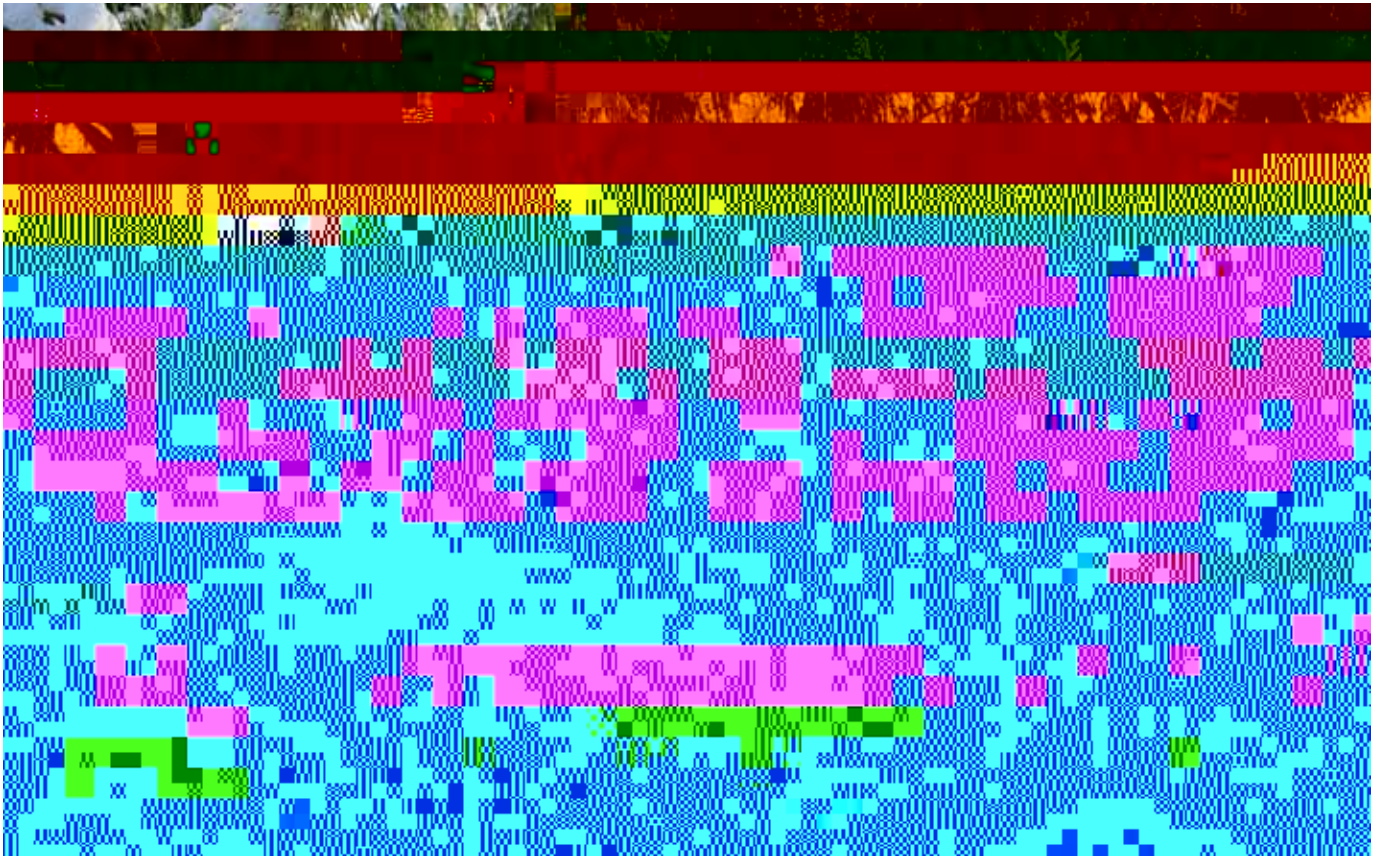
The foliage of *Clematis cirrhosa* 'Freckles' is elegant all winter, the foundation of green colour overlaid with bronze. I regularly pass the stump of a much lamented *Chamaecyparis lawsoniana* which was the host for the clematis until it died of Phytophthora Root Rot. The stump is now almost concealed by the clematis and on a cold February day the vines hanging down the stump were decorated with creamy yellow flowers like pendant lampshades with wine red spots inside.

It is often the joy of clematis, to enhance or conceal a plant or feature in the landscape. It is one of a family of plants, the Ranunculaceae, which are gloriously floriferous

Picture gallery

Beth Doman

On January 17, a dusting of snow fell on campus, followed by a brief period of sunshine. This created an opportunity for me to run out with our new Canon DSLR. Of course I ended up, as I always do, in Finnerly Gardens.



Spring is in the air, daffodils bloom over carpets of crocus. The old flowering plum is a cloud of pink tinged white flowers, soon to be succeeded by copper shaded purple leaves. Winter is past and a time of joyous gardening and pilgrimage to plant nurseries is at hand. There is also a reasonable security, as I write, that the dam has enough water for garden use, with moderation.

I spent some time on my knees on a sunny day removing last year's foliage from Yellow Bishop's Hat—*Epimedium X versicolour* 'Sulphureum'. This enables the spring flowers and new foliage to flourish. During the winter, last year's foliage had little frost damage and was elegantly decorative. The rhizomes of this genus slowly spread into a woody structure and benefit from a spring tonic of sulphate of potash—you can buy a small box of it in garden shops. Also try to add some compost or potting soil mix.

This tonic will also be appreciated by the tubers of *Cyclamen hederifolium* and *C. coum*, which are blooming as I write. The exquisite rose pink flowers are like jewels glowing amongst rain washed glossy green foliage. I like to watch for seedlings later in the year and move them gently on the end of a broken knife. Plant firmly, just below the surface of the soil.

Spring weeding adds to the compost pile but can be hard on the knees. I have a pad but find a remnant chunk of foam softer.

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plants for them.

