



### Book Review by Margaret Hodgson

#### ***The Gardener's Guide to Growing Peonies*** by Martin Page

160 pages, approx. 76 plates colour photos, Appendices include *Glossary, Bibliography, Synonyms of Peony Species, Where to Buy Peonies*. Index. Published in North America in 1997 by Timber Press Inc., Portland, Oregon. Copyright Martin Page 1997. ISBN 0 7153 0531 X (hardcover)

**Martin Page** studied botany at Swansea University and went on to receive a PhD from the University of Exeter. He has continued his botanical research developing a specialization in peonies over the last few years. He is establishing a collection of species peonies and has started to breed his own varieties. A professional photographer for many years, he developed a specialization in horticultural and landscape photography. Martin is a member of the American Peony Society and his other main plant interests are palms, citrus species and herbaceous perennials.

***The Gardener's Guide to Growing Peonies*** is a comprehensive and wide-ranging study of a large genus with a complex classification, and the first major review of the peony since 1946. Specialists will derive much valuable botanical information while practical gardeners will find ideas for using peonies in

rockeries, herbaceous borders and woodland gardens as well as for autumn colour and as feature plants. The book includes detailed descriptions of over 600 species and cultivars, features a wealth of practical advice on cultivation, pest and disease control, garden uses and contains research into the plant's history, distribution and developments in hybridizing.

The author points out that the peony is an immensely rewarding plant for gardeners giving a profusion of magnificent flowers on thornless stems throughout a long season and with little care. Many peonies have the additional bonus of being scented and, with over 4,000 varieties of herbaceous peony available, there is sure to be a colour to suit every situation. They are drought-resistant and largely unaffected by pests and diseases.

The book is divided into nine chapters, plus an Introduction and the Appendices following at the end with the Index. Following the common pattern of so many gardening books, Chapter One leads the reader into History and Botany with such interesting details as the likely derivation of the name "peony" which the author explains is "peony" and not "paeony", which is a recent corruption of the Latin name. It is thought to have been named after the Greek mythological figure, Paeon, a pupil of Asclepius, the Greek God of medicine and healing. He reputedly discovered peonies growing on the slopes of Mount Olympus – after Leto (Apollo's mother) told him where to find them – and used them to cure a wound that Pluto had received in a fight with Heracles. Asclepius was so jealous of Paeon's success that he had him killed. However, the grateful Pluto then had him changed into the flower that cured him. The author dryly comments that this seems little compensation for his fate!

In medieval times, peonies were highly valued as medicinal plants to relieve "pains of the belly", "jaundice", "complaints of the kidneys and bladder", "to prevent nightmares", "falling sickness", "convulsions" to name a few. Dried peonies were also hung outside of houses, as were peony bushes planted, to ward off evil spirits, and petals of dried peonies and root bark are still used extensively in traditional Chinese medicine.

***The Gardener's Guide to Growing Peonies*** offers the reader a wide range of subjects, covering in the various chapters peony species, hybrids, tree peonies and the best way to use them in your garden. Enjoy this book.