

THE PLANT COLUMN

Martin Stimson



Ludlow's Tree Peony...



A plant for Four Seasons

Martin Stimson continues his bi monthly series of very personal reflections of plants which are significant to him. This month he considers the value of a tree peony that he raised from seed which provides something of interest to look at throughout the year. Martin works at Writtle College, an Internationally renowned Landbased College in Essex, where he is Director of Academic Standards. Prior to that he was a Lecturer and Head of Horticulture at Writtle. He has studied plants, gardens and landscapes for over 25 years.

When I was a child the school teacher set up an experiment using large seeds. Broad beans and runner bean seeds were germinated on moist paper, and then planted into compost. The plants were grown in different situations throughout the classroom and we then measured the growth of the plants over time. I found the measuring and the variation in plant growth interesting, and I still find something intensely fascinating about watching a large seed germinate, and I still enjoy watching vigorous plants grow. I've been captivated by this wonder all my life. The dry sometimes crinkled outer surface of a large seed can look dead, but we know that with a little moisture and some warmth, the coat will smooth out and swell, eventually splitting and allowing new life to be visible.

In my garden, adjacent to a standard 1.8 m high fence, I have a large Tree Peony (*Paeonia ludlowii*) which I raised from seed. Ludlow's Tree Peony is now taller than the fence, fills a large space and is enjoyed as much by my neighbour as it is by myself, especially when it's in flower.

There is something philosophically different about the way plant owners relate to plants that have been raised by themselves, when compared to plants that have been introduced to the garden by

others. I'm responsible for this plants existence from seed and so it seems to have more meaning to me. It is now a 'horticultural friend', known more intimately to me perhaps than if I'd purchased it from a nursery. I raised it from seed collected from the floor underneath a mature plant. As I



picked up the seed one can only imagine what it must have been like for Ludlow and Sherriff the famous plant hunters and collectors when they encountered this plant in the wild in Tibet. They introduced it to cultivation in 1936. I have not read about their experiences yet, its on my list to do, but they must have been excited at the prospect, especially if they were able to collect the seed which is conspicuously large, round and black.

Peony seed (large) among

I remember someone telling me that Ludlow's Tree Peony (which is yellow in bloom and sometimes seen as *P. lutea ludlowii*), was a little unusual because this handsome plant comes true from seed. That is to say that if you sow a hundred seeds they would all come out the same as the parent plant, rather than exhibit a wide range of variable flowers in shape and form and colour.

In the last 8 weeks I have witnessed my tree peony go from dormancy, through to flowering and into seed development. It's a rapid growth cycle supported throughout by a strong permanent infrastructure of stems and leaves.

To be honest the plant can look dead in the winter, but it quickly undergoes the miracle which is rapid growth and flowering in March and April. Large buds on the tips of strong, vertical stems from ground level, are prominently held all through the winter. When spring arrives, the buds become conspicuous (in the same way as for example horse chestnuts do), by splitting open to reveal a green scale inside. Within a few days, new rather large leaves emerge, which are deeply cut and prominently veined. When I saw them this year they reminded me of the way a Savoy cabbage is deeply ribbed and veined. These leaves begin to unwind quickly and present what look like miniature peony plants on the end of stalks where the buds once stood. After a week or so in fair weather the petioles expand rapidly, and the distinctive large cut margined leaves, begin to unfurl. The foliage is strong and bold throughout the growing season and therefore encourages designers and gardeners to place it where the foliage can be appreciated in a prominent position.

Remarkably, in my view, almost immediately after the first three leaves stiffen out, a plump, round



green flower bud is visible in the centre of each cluster of leaves. How is this possible so quickly? The bud then rapidly expands and eventually splits to reveal a lemon yellow petaled bloom with masses of anthers in the centre. I had convinced myself that the flower was scented, but a number of forays into the shrub border with my nasal organ thrust up against each bloom reveals that the scent

is insignificant in the garden, and only noticeable when the nose is right in the middle of the flower. Not much use then. The scent is very delicate, but it might be noticeable if the flowers are brought inside. Something else to try in the future.

Strong stems in winter, fascinating foliage in early spring, arresting architectural leaves in the summer, scattered with pale yellow bloom in April and May makes this peony one of my favourites. Then the blooms are followed by pods which enclose shiny black fruits. The pods themselves are of interest in the autumn. This is a plant for all four seasons, and something to keep your eye on all year around.



In fact my first encounter with this plant was not in spring or summer but in a cold windy autumn. *Peony lutea ludlowii* produces large fat pods, which initially are green and then ripen red on the side which faces the sun. If left on the plant they dry out and split to reveal large jet black seeds bigger than garden peas. The seed cases of the pods can hang around on the plant after the seed has fallen out or drop

onto the floor to join the leaf litter. If collected in the green the pods will dry on a window sill and split open to reveal the seed in full beauty.



After a breeze, which autumn invariably brings, the seeds are scattered underneath the parent plant. In the winter the large black pea like seeds can be found scattered all around the floor under a peony. They do lose their gloss as they get absorbed into the ground, or float around on the water flows or maybe even get moved by mice. It's easy to see how in the wild they would form a woodland floor thicket, as the seeds get dispersed from the tops of tall upright shoots which rock in the wind. The seed is hard and rolls about, but then it gets incorporated into the surrounding leaf litter. Quite soon in a hard winter the seed will germinate and it's quite obvious to whom the seedlings belong. Small peony leaves at soil level. Juveniles who so obviously resemble the parents.



Meanwhile as spring activity increases the parent plant is coming into leaf. Tufts of cut leaves emerge from strong plump buds and grow rapidly into huge cut leaves which themselves are regarded as architectural. Sometimes this plant is recommended for associating with courtyards and hard surfaces so that its majesty is not spoiled by competing with the foliage from other plants. The leaves are pale green and striking. When they are cut or damaged they emit a pungent, but not unpleasant aroma.

The stems are strong and vertical, like rods, and when there are too many they can be easily pruned down to the ground. This also releases the distinctive perfume. I like to remove a few old branches each year down to ground level. This encourages new growth which is strong and fresh and it keeps the plant young at heart.

My own plant is huge now at 3 m high, but it is topped in April and early May with yellow lemon flowers backed by pale green limy leaves. The flowers don't last as long as I think they should, but then after a visit by the bees, what follows are the interesting pods. Firstly bright green and

thick; clumsy but beautiful. Then the pods begin to colour like apples do on the sunny side. Eventually splitting in autumn to reveal their shiny contents similar in many ways to a bean.

Ludlow's peony is a plant that can become too big for some gardens, and not much will grow underneath unless the outer branches are taken back to let light get to the base. As far as biomass production is concerned it almost like a willow. It needs managing unless your garden is immense and you have the space to let it romp free. Older stems lose their greenness and are interesting because the bark exfoliates in a gentle outward peel, nothing adventurous but suitably subtle for interested studious gardeners.

A journey inside the plant will reveal a plant that it is loved by wildlife. Snails will shelter in the winter, tucked tightly against the dry stems. Lady birds scavenge any black fly that dares to come near and Blues Tits will shelter and forage in all the foliage. A few shady plants like Dicentra survive nearby as does Sarcococca and Tierella, adding to the cosmopolitan woodland feel.

Despite its short flowering season the handsome leaves and the cut margins provide interest throughout the summer and provide an interesting backdrop to the garden border.

I'm still fascinated by the speed with which it grows, and my neighbour loves it as well. If you have the space, get some seeds and watch them grow and develop. You too might end up rearing one of Ludlow's giant introductions.

