The Seattle-Luoyang Peony Festival

By Phil Wood

Peonies have a bright future in Seattle. This winter, the Seattle Chinese Garden completed planting hundreds of tree peony rootstocks, and it will celebrate their blooms this May when the Seattle-Luoyang Peony Festival opens to the public.

Paeonia suffruticosa 'Fragrant Jade'. (Photo by Sandy Marvinney)
Background on the Chinese Garden
Located in West Seattle adjacent to South Seattle Community College, the Seattle Chinese Garden invites visitors to experience some of the marvels of China without ever having to leave Seattle. It grew out of Seattle’s Sister City relationship with Chongqing, China and is designed by the Chongqing Parks Bureau. The Garden’s first courtyard opened to the public in early 2011.

The Seattle Chinese Garden joins three other Chinese gardens on the West Coast: the Dr. Sun Yat-Sen Classical Chinese Garden in Vancouver, B.C.; the Lan Su Chinese Garden in Portland, Oregon; and the Garden of Flowing Fragrance at the Huntington, near Los Angeles. Unlike these three, which are based on scholars’ gardens in the Suzhou area near Shanghai, the Seattle Chinese Garden takes its inspiration from gardens in Sichuan Province and the Municipality of Chongqing, a thousand miles up the Yangtze River from Shanghai. The Chongqing designers drew from memorial gardens and temples in the rugged terrain of southwest China. The design fits perfectly into the Seattle garden’s sloping site, surrounded on two sides by a green belt.
Chinese gardens are centers for both culture and horticulture, and the Seattle Chinese Garden is no exception: It has a schedule of activities in 2014 that includes martial arts demonstrations, Chinese conversation lessons, a Celebrate Sichuan event and a kite-flying festival. The non-profit Seattle Chinese Garden Society plans to raise the funds to build the rest of the garden in the coming years and eventually cover five acres. The future Floating Clouds Pavilion will provide views of the city skyline, Elliott Bay and Mount Rainier. A teahouse overlooking a lotus pond will offer refreshments, and the Gathering Together Hall will provide room for meetings and banquets for 200. The garden will include a bamboo walk and a stream rushing through a rocky gorge into a lake.

The Luoyang Connection
The Garden has developed a relationship with the city of Luoyang—the peony capital of China. (Luoyang’s annual peony festival draws millions of visitors from all around the world for three weeks each April.) In 2012 and 2013, the Garden received large donations of tree peony plants from Luoyang and its peony growers, under the auspices of the American Peony and Culture Association.
Peonies have been cultivated for over 2000 years in China. First mentioned in Chinese literature in the fourth century BCE, they have played an important role in the culture and arts of China. While the herbaceous peony (Paeonia lactiflora, or shaoyao in Mandarin) is highly regarded, the tree peony (Paeonia suffruticosa, or mudan in Mandarin) is the king of flowers in China, appearing frequently in painting and poetry.

The new collection in the Seattle Chinese Garden consists of more than 400 tree peony plants, representing 27 different varieties. They have evocative names: ‘Luster of Jade’ (Jing Yu) is white with a pink blush, and ‘Shining Black Gold’ (Wu Jin Yao Hui) is deep red. The flower colors include white, pink and many shades of red; the flower types are single, semi-double and double.

**Cultivating Tree Peonies**

Tree peonies are not technically “trees” but more like mid-sized deciduous shrubs, growing between three to six feet tall. However, unlike herbaceous peonies, which die to the ground each year (and grow two to four feet tall), tree peonies do develop woody stems. Each tree peony plant will bear up to 50 flowers when mature. Tree peonies usually bloom in early to mid-May, two to three weeks earlier than herbaceous peonies, which bloom...

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**Peony Festival Details**

The Seattle Chinese Garden will host the Seattle–Luoyang Peony Festival on Saturday, May 3. The event will feature talks on peony care and the importance of these plants in Chinese culture, a peony art exhibit, and a peony plant sale. Keep an eye out, too, for the Garden’s annual Bamboo Festival on May 17 and 18, which includes talks on bamboo care and a plant sale by members of the Pacific Northwest Chapter of the American Bamboo Society.

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*ABOVE: The first shipment of tree peony rootstock arrived from Luoyang in November 2012. Pictured here (from left to right) are Kirk Chia, president of the American Peony Art and Culture Association (APACA); Yiqiao (George) Jiang of Luoyang and APACA; Seattle Chinese Garden Horticulture Chair (and article author) Phil Wood; and horticulturist and garden volunteer Riz Reyes. (Photo by Sandy Marvinney)*
around Memorial Day—and their flowers tend to be bigger than those of herbaceous varieties.

Tree peonies do very well in the Pacific Northwest and grow best in well-drained soil in a site with at least six hours of sun. In China, they are displayed in large public gardens, planted en masse in beds with no companion plants. Most home gardens in the Northwest don’t have the room for that kind of large display—but gardeners here should still indulge because tree peonies also look wonderful in the mixed border.

In a mixed border setting, consider choosing companion plants with evergreen foliage to add interest to the bare stems of tree peonies in winter. For example, the ground cover Geranium macrorrhizum adds bright green foliage and spring flowers. When choosing flowering shrubs as companions, select species with earlier or later bloom times than tree peonies to extend seasonal interest. Pieris japonica, the lily-of-the-valley shrub, makes a fine accompaniment, providing both glossy, evergreen leaves and mid-March bloom.

Plant peony roots in the fall when they are available by mail order. In the spring, some local nurseries have them available in pots. This spring, Swanson’s Nursery and Wells Medina Nursery will have tree peonies from Luoyang for sale.

Visiting the Seattle Chinese Garden

The tree peonies in the Seattle Chinese Garden are expected to be in peak bloom during the first three weeks in May. Exact bloom time will depend on the weather. Of course, the Garden is worth visiting any time during the year. For directions, call 206–934–5219 or visit www.seattlechinesegarden.org. Current open hours through October 31 are Tuesday through Sunday, from 11:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. Check the Garden’s website for updates and for late-fall and winter hours.

Adjacent to the Seattle Chinese Garden is the South Seattle Community College Arboretum, built and maintained by the Landscape Horticulture Program of the college. It is open from dawn until dusk every day. Don’t miss the Coenosium Rock Garden, with one of the largest collections of dwarf conifers in the United States.

Phyl Wood is the owner of Phil Wood Garden Design (www.philwoodgardens.com), a residential landscape design and installation company. In recent years, he has helped design many of the Arboretum’s award-winning exhibits at the Northwest Flower & Garden Show. Phil also serves on the editorial board of the “Bulletin.”

LEFT: Yiqiao (George) Jiang helps a visitor select a peony painting at the 2013 Seattle-Luoyang Peony Festival. Mr. Jiang is a native of Luoyang and son of China’s top-ranked peony painter. He is also a skilled artist himself, and a businessman who divides his time between Seattle and Luoyang. (Photo by Liz Hattemer)