

PEONY HYBRIDISATION AND SEED SOWING

Judy Templar

At the 2010 Peony Group AGM, several members brought stems of peonies from their own gardens for us to admire. Particularly striking was a bloom of *Paeonia* 'Earlybird' (Saunders, 1939) brought by Jo Bennison, of Bennison Peonies in Lincolnshire. This peony is a hybrid (*P. tenuifolia* x *P. anomala* ssp. *veitchii*), with bright crimson flowers and finely-dissected leaves, betraying its *Paeonia tenuifolia* parentage. It was most certainly on my 'want' list.



Filigree-foliaged *P. tenuifolia*



P. anomala ssp. *veitchii*

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This year, at the HPS AGM, I spotted a plant on the raffle table with the label *Paeonia* 'Early Bird'. I managed to track down the donor of the plant: Jaime Blake, Head Gardener at Bressingham. Jaime told me that Alan Bloom had bred the plant and, from Alan's notes, Jaime had discovered that he had also used *P. tenuifolia* and *P. veitchii* as parents. He had named it 'Early Bird' because it was always the first peony to flower in the garden. Jaime was kind enough to send me a plant.

The foliage on Alan Bloom's plant is less finely divided than Saunders' 'Earlybird', and I have yet to see the flowers. Of course, all this spurred me on to try to acquire a plant of 'Earlybird', so a visit to Bennison Peonies was planned. I was delighted when Jo said her plant was ready for dividing and I could order a piece. 'Early Bird' and 'Earlybird' have now been planted in a bed alongside a couple of *P. tenuifolia*. Exciting times!

With renewed interest in the hybrid plants between *P. tenuifolia* and *P. anomala* ssp. *veitchii*, I determined to make the same cross myself. Little *P. veitchii*, with its deep pink flowers (featured in the HPS Seed List over



P. 'Earlybird'

© Jo Bennison

many years) was to be the seed parent. I selected a flower which was just beginning to open, so that I could remove the anthers before any of its pollen had ripened, in order to avoid self-pollination. After carefully transferring pollen from *P. tenuifolia* onto the stigma of the emasculated *P. veitchii*, the pollinated flower was protected all summer from the attention of bees. The result was a good crop of 20 fertile seeds. All the seeds were planted immediately.

It may be useful to give some advice on sowing/ germinating peony seeds. First of all, the 'science' of this. In the wild or open garden, peony seeds will fall to the ground from the follicles once they have matured and fully opened, in late summer. The seed then spends time in warm, damp conditions on the ground, until the winter months provide a period of cold, followed by spring warmth. It has been found (Norman C. Deno, 1993, *Seed Germination - Theory & Practice*) that the radical (first root) appears during the warm period of late summer and autumn. The cold spell of winter provokes the conditions needed for the development of the branching root system. Not until the warmth of spring will the true leaf appear. At this point it should be noted that, for most peony species, germination is hypogeal (true leaf as opposed to the cotyledons making first appearance). Exceptions to this are the two American species (*P. brownii* and *P. californica*) and *P. tenuifolia*, where the cotyledons appear above ground first.

Any peony seed acquired from the HPS seed exchange or commercial sources will have missed out on the first period of damp warm conditions, and is quite likely to fail to germinate the first year from sowing. The seed may have entered a period of dormancy, so it is always wise to retain pots of ungerminated seed for several years. You can imagine from the above that great fun can be had in mimicking the requirements for germination (which I have done myself).

For the time being, my advice would be to sow the seed in gritty compost as soon as possible and place outside in a shady position. You may need to protect pots from the attentions of mice, and always ensure that the compost stays moist. Then wait! This is a marathon, not a sprint. I prefer to leave seedlings in the pot for a year before pricking out into individual pots.

I highly recommend the HPS booklet *Peonies*, by Gail Harland, for all aspects of cultivation, including propagation.

∞ Compiled from two articles published in the Peony Group Newsletter, Autumn 2017 ∞