

# Edgar Riek's Tree Peonies

By Janet Hill



## Wow! What a sight to behold!

Saturday, 6 October 2012 was overcast with intermittent showers, however this inclement weather failed to deter a goodly number of HSOC members who eagerly accepted Edgar and Mary Riek's invitation to view their Ainslie garden. On a previous spring visit to this established garden, members had been delighted by the display of bulbs, hellebores, peonies, camellias, azaleas, dogwoods and rhododendrons. Mary's love of floral art was evidenced by the variety of these plants and many others in this beautiful garden. I went along with feelings of great anticipation as I was particularly looking forward to seeing the tree peonies.

To my mind all peonies have a magnificent, rich beauty, but tree peonies (*Paeonia suffruticosa*) are exceptionally glamorous. Just a single bloom, its silky petals cupped around the luxuriant golden yellow stamens, can easily take your attention. But the sight of so many mature plants, each between 1 to 2 metres tall, and covered with large showy blooms, stopped many of us in our tracks in this special garden.

In talking with Edgar later I learned that all these stunning tree peonies were seedlings which he'd bred over a period of fifty or so years.

In the 1950s a friend, Gordon Boote, had a property at Sutton where he grew tall bearded iris and a tree peony amongst other flowering plants. Gordon gave Edgar some tree peony seeds from his one plant. Edgar dried these seeds before planting, as he was concerned that they would otherwise rot. After planting the seeds it was two years before Edgar had seedlings and it took five years to the flowering stage. The year of the first flowering Edgar took fresh seed from the pods and after planting he had seedlings in one year.

Tree peonies originally come from China where they were first cultivated from wild plants 2,000 years ago, and regarded as the 'king of flowers'. Plants have also been bred since the 8th century in Japan. Edgar has worked on selection and breeding to achieve the wide colour range and styles that he wanted, including flowers that sit up rather than hang down.

From the few seeds off that original plant given to him by Gordon, Edgar has bred large blooms of snow white and shades of the softest pink through to



All cultivars pictured in this article are unnamed as they are seedlings.



the deepest purple. He has tried to breed a blue, which is the next colour phase after purple. One of his and Mary's favourite blooms is a soft pink double with luminescent petals (photo opposite, middle left). He has also bred a mid-pink variety which has a slight indication of perfume.

In regard to the planting and care of tree peonies, Edgar provides the following information and tips.

- Tree peonies grow best at pH 6.5-7.5. The soil should be treated with a combination of dolomite and microfine lime (Canberra soils are very acid). If only dolomite is used the soil may show magnesium toxicity from the excessive dolomite. Both chemical additions penetrate the soil only moderately so the soil should be well mixed.
- The soil should also be enriched with compost and/or animal manure for water retention as well as food – again, mix well.
- If your soil is well prepared and pH adjusted you should not add anything

when you plant.

- The best time to plant is end of June to early July.
- Feed, if needed, from the surface only after active growth. This is best done with pellets, such as Multigrow.
- Do not disbud excessive growths, but remove them completely.
- Unless the growth is very crowded there is no need to remove old growths.
- Usually by removing the top half of a plant, that has a single stem, the remaining plant will send up a number of new shoots. You will not get flowers for a year or two but the plant will make up for that in subsequent years and be a much more attractive plant.
- Tree peonies are fairly drought tolerant but surface mulch will help to keep the roots cool.

As members of the HSOC since 1951, Edgar and Mary had been very involved in HSOC affairs. They were very successful in

exhibiting a variety of their flowers and won many HSOC championships, particularly during the 1950s and 1960s. Also in 1953, 1957-58 and 1959-60 they were awarded Faulkner Medals from the Royal Horticultural Society of Victoria for being the most successful exhibitors across all the HSOC Shows in those years.

The Reiks have kindly offered to provide a number of their tree peony seedlings to be planted in the HSOC demonstration garden at Bruce.

Dr Edgar Riek is a past President and Honorary Life Member of the HSOC, produced the 3rd Edition (1959) of *The Canberra Gardener* based on his practical experience in our region, and contributed to subsequent editions. He was awarded an AOM in 1996 for his research in entomology at the CSIRO and pioneering work in the local wine industry (vineyard at Lake George).

