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Linwood Gardens, near Rochester, New York, is the historic home of a large group of tree peonies bred by William Henry Gratwick II and his friends. Gratwick's daughter, Lee, has updated the garden's design so that it celebrates peonies at every turn, such as here near the lily pool. Opposite inset: The cultivar 'Zephyrus'.



# Finding Linwood

Three generations contribute to one garden's success

by TOVAH MARTIN ~ photography by CAROL WHITLOCK



After you've rolled past field after field of central New York State's Genesee Valley farmland and figured that the countryside can't possibly hold anything but hard-nosed agriculture in its hills and dales, you arrive at Linwood. Part of its mystique is certainly the garden's



## if you go

Linwood Gardens is located in Pavilion, New York, 35 miles southwest of Rochester. It is open on select days in spring and summer, beginning with a special Festival of Flowers during the peonies' spring bloom. Visit [linwoodgardens.org](http://linwoodgardens.org) or call 585-584-3913 for dates and details.

**Above:** Linwood Gardens was once a peony nursery, where much breeding took place. Today some cultivars remain in rows in the old nursery area, while others are scattered through the property. The light pink in the foreground is 'Momoyama'.

**Right:** Close up of 'Tama Fuyo'.

**Opposite page:** 'Hephestos', bred by Nassos Daphnis, a friend of Linwood's second owner.



complete incongruity with its surroundings. There, in the middle of nowhere, as if a mirage for the horticulturally hungry (make that starved) traveler, resides the hauntingly eloquent home of the oldest surviving tree peony collection in this country.

Linwood is haven to the collection of named Japanese tree peonies introduced to the United States in the 1930s by William Henry Gratwick III, as well as his painstaking selections from 600 seeds imported when he first opened it as a nursery. It also cradles the handiwork of two renowned tree peony hybridizers—A. P. Saunders and Nassos Daphnis—whose monumental work made seismic impacts on the breadth of tree peonies in this country. Long ago, Linwood lost its nursery demeanor and the peonies are now incorporated throughout the landscape. In the happiest of all possible outcomes, what remains are those majestic, graceful, mature plants and their poetry.

Today Linwood offers a seductive *Secret Garden* type of experience. Wandering around it is like opening the flood gates to your fantasies; it's almost surreal. It's the embodiment of the place you've always yearned to find, complete with cracking cement walls, state-of-the-art perennials and statuesque trees of such infinite character that each has personality. Three generations of Gratwicks contributed to the garden's making. However, the element that makes this place like no other is the most recent layer bestowed by Lee Gratwick. She is the one who sprinkled the fairy dust, so to speak, and made the collection come alive.

Lee's grandfather, William Henry Gratwick II, was a Buffalo businessman who decided he richly deserved a country place. So he hopped the milk train and rode it approximately 60 miles from the city with no particular destination in mind. One look at the view in Pavilion, New York, sold the gentleman on that town as the optimal neighborhood, despite the lack of kindred spirits or equivalent wealth nearby. He proceeded to buy up adjacent farms from 1901 to 1910, until he'd amassed 325 acres. In Linwood's first incarnation, it was a flourishing country estate replete with formal gardens, strong hardscaping and a brigade of gardeners preening the grounds to perfection. With that rock solid foundation at its base, the skeleton remained strong long after the estate entered leaner times after the 1920s.

Then came William Henry Gratwick III, Lee's

father, who studied landscape architecture in college and took over the estate in 1933 to start a rare plant nursery. He was struck by the beauty of boxwood and strove to improve those hardy evergreens until they could endure the cold of upstate New York. He discovered tree peonies after meeting A. P. Saunders, a chemistry professor with an interest in the plants. Gratwick imported 600 Japanese tree peony seeds, trialed them and selected 12 worthies to introduce, many of which remain classics: 'Captain's Concubine,' 'Guardian of the Monastery' and 'Companion of Serenity' are all his introductions. Meanwhile, Saunders proceeded to breed, using species to expand the color range and strengthen other attributes.

But that was just the beginning, because excellence tends to attract further genius. Nassos Daphnis, a young Greek artist, made the pilgrimage from New York City with the intention of painting the tree peonies. He accomplished that mission, but not without catching the contagion so mightily that he began hybridizing in 1945. Named for Greek gods, peonies in the Daphnis collection have very graceful form and magnificent flowers in glistening painterly shades. Gratwick harbored and propagated the Daphnis creations alongside the Saunders hybrids as well as his own collection from the original acquisition of 600 seeds. Was he infatuated? Undoubtedly. But the tree peonies merely figured as one of Gratwick's multitude of interests alongside sculpture, writing, sheep breeding and more. As his daughter says, "He lived a large artistic life."




#### LEE'S MARK

Lee was born the year her father began his nursery in 1935. Her father would call out their names as the two walked through the nursery, “and I was impressed by those names: ‘Mountain of Sunlit Snow,’ ‘Lion of the Cherry Orchard,’ ‘World of the Rising Sun.’” But it wasn’t until Lee returned to Linwood after a 23-year absence that she started to work with the plants and realized the importance of the collection and how the peonies contributed a focus to the historic gardens.

It wasn’t necessarily easy. When Lee returned, the boxwood edging in the gardens had reached 10 feet high, while the yew was an ungainly 12 feet tall. Rather than slavishly attempting to recreate the original scene, Lee reworked the gardens with her inherent sense of design. She updated their demeanor and downsized the acreage in cultivation so that she could concentrate primarily on nurturing the collection. And, most importantly, she set the tree peonies free. Lee incorporated them into the overall landscape, sprinkling tree peonies wherever a softening element was needed. She lined them in front of the former vegetable garden’s walls, she stationed them as focal points throughout the formal gardens that she restored, she set them in places where they would shine, but always within the comfortable context of a frame. Rather

than making them an icon, she demonstrated how tree peonies could become infused into a garden.

And she learned. She discovered the lessons of how to nurture tree peonies into their senior years, giving them the drainage they require (during a visit to China, she discovered that they’re often planted in raised beds), protecting them from the harsh winter by positioning them with shelter in mind, battling the wasps that bore into exposed wounds (a dab of Tanglefoot does it), allowing them to attain their natural form without strict pruning. When they’re in blossom, no one could possibly fail to fall under the spell of tree peonies. But she saw their subtleties in other seasons. “Their stark branches in the snow, the crimson buds in early spring, the wonderful transformation of unfurling green, I never tire of watching these changes,” she explains. So she displayed them where the blushing buds would be seen to best advantage or where the spring celadon would read strongly.

Something about Linwood touches everyone who ventures into its domain on a very personal level. That was Lee Gratwick’s objective all along. 

Sources, page 74.

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TOVAH MARTIN’s passion for all things growing and encased in glass has led to her most recent book, *The New Terrarium* (Clarkson Potter, 2009). Visit [tovahmartin.com](http://tovahmartin.com) for details.

## peony heaven

Opposite, top: A group of Japanese peonies that Nassos Daphnis used to breed his hybrids at Linwood. The white on the right is ‘Gessekai’. Behind it is the purple ‘Horakumon’. The floppy pink is ‘Suzakumon’ whose flowers are huge. Behind ‘Suzakumon’ is the tall ‘Hana Kiso’. To the right of ‘Suzakumon’ is ‘Hi-Ow’, a deeper pink with lighter edges. The rose-red in left foreground is ‘Shin Kagura’. The white on the far left is ‘Suisho Haku’.

Opposite, bottom left: Many original hardscape elements of Linwood’s inception remain at the garden, though they are now softened by peony blooms, such as the rose-red ‘Leda’, bred by Daphnis.

Opposite, bottom right: ‘Companion of Serenity’, one of William Gratwick II’s introductions.

