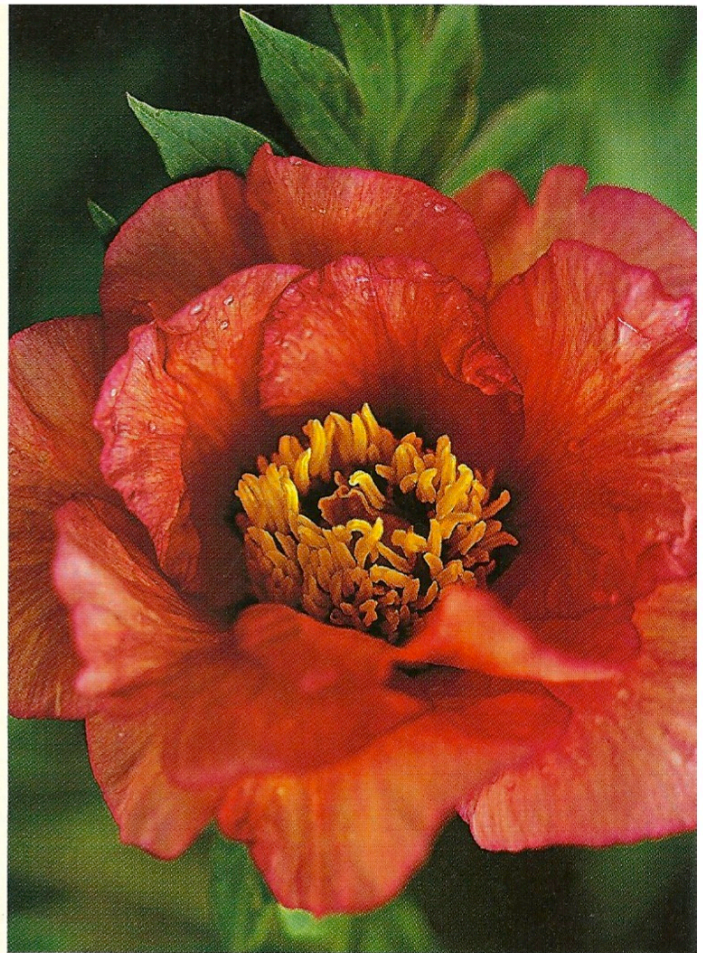


THE *prince* OF *peonies*

Hardy and long-lived, for all their fragile beauty, tree peonies are truly the aristocrats of the garden. Here, in upstate New York, they hold court in May.

PHOTOGRAPHED BY LISA HUBBARD | PRODUCED AND WRITTEN BY TOVAH MARTIN

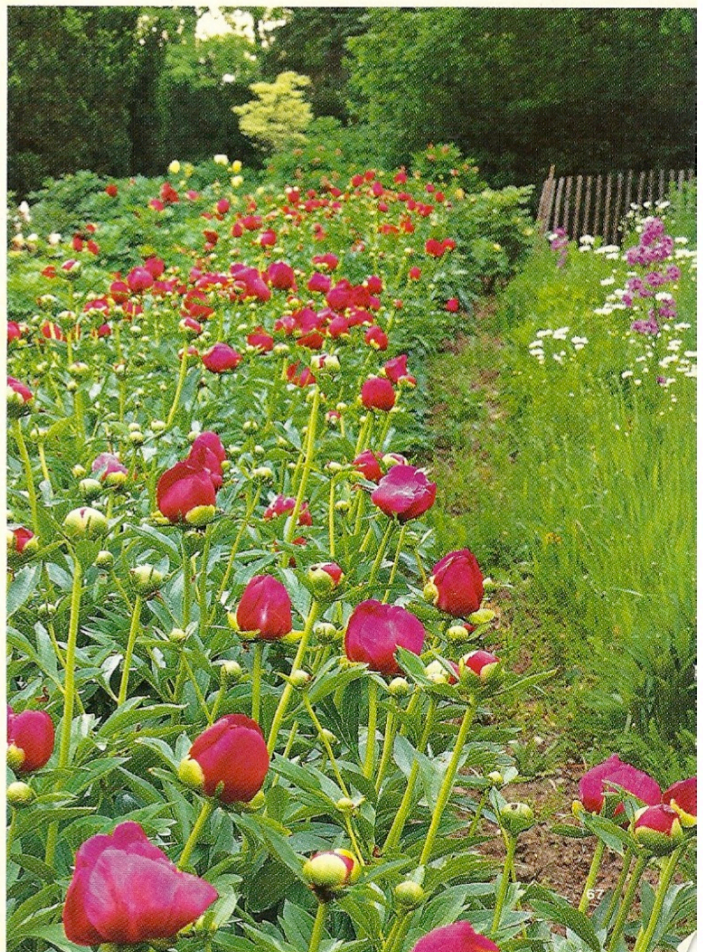


With its labyrinth of thick walls and arched doorways beckoning into sequestered gardens, its gnarled wisteria sprawling theatrically over ancient arbors, Lee Gratwick's family estate is bewitching at any time of year. But when the tree peonies are aquiver with their crop of immense, chiffon-petaled flowers, the place is divine.

That's when most people encounter Linwood. During the last two weekends in May, Lee opens Linwood's gates, inviting the public to come and admire the collection of three hundred and sixty mature tree peonies—a hundred and sixteen varieties—in a spectrum of shimmering ball-gown colors. But the flowers are only part of Linwood's allure. Just as seductive is the faded glory of the old estate.

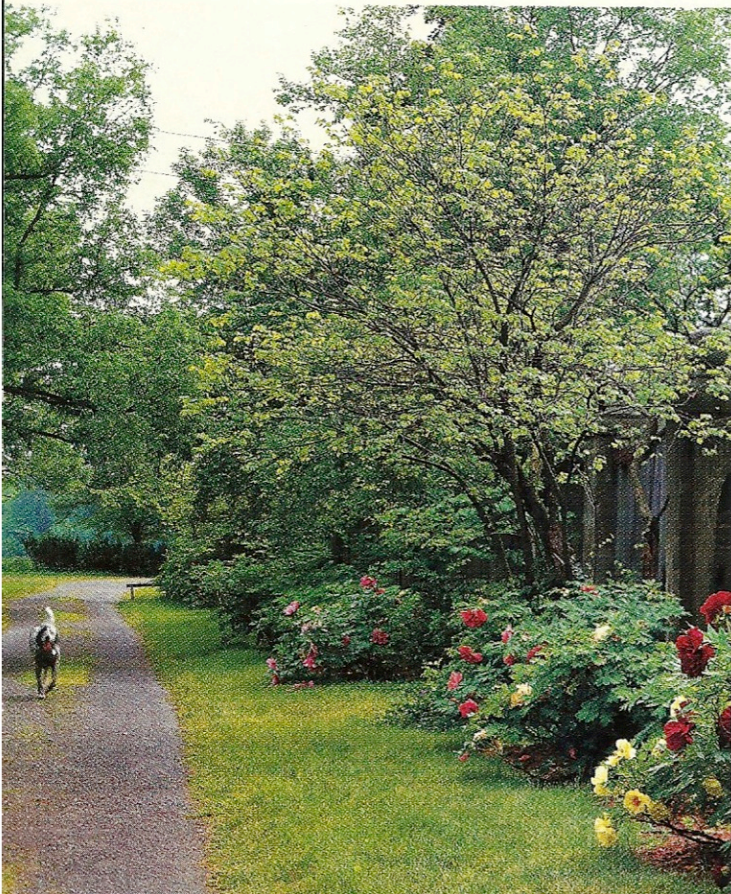
For the garden's splendid design, Lee has her grandfather, William Henry Gratwick II, to thank. He was the one who rode the milk train out of Buffalo in 1901 with the goal of finding a country place within sixty miles of the city, got off at a rural road crossing, walked up the hill, drank in the view, and set about amassing Linwood's three hundred and twenty-five acres. He built a vast Tudor revival house and had the grounds landscaped with a wealth of masonry walls, brick

LINWOOD IS FAMED for the work of tree peony hybridizers like Nassos Daphnis, a painter who worked with Lee's father to create such sublime specimens as 'Leda' (opposite) and 'Gauguin' (above right). Nassos still comes to visit his hybrids when they bloom in May. The Italian garden (above) is punctuated by tree peonies like the yellow 'Goldfinch.' The most reliable way to propagate tree peonies is to graft cuttings onto the roots of herbaceous peonies (like the row of 'Scarlett O'Hara,' right); the cuttings will then form their own roots.





"Love color, but structure comes first. It's the walls and archways that create the vital framework."




walks and deftly framed fountains the likes of which this hardscrabble farming community had never seen.

Linwood's pride, its tree peony collection, was the work of the next generation. In 1934, the year Lee was born, her father came home to open a nursery. A sculptor with split affinities between art and landscape design, he fell under the spell of these painterly flowers with their sculptural forms, became an avid collector and began a hybridizing program.

But when Lee returned to her family home in 1980 after two decades away pursuing her own career, a period of inattention had taken its toll. Much of the house had been destroyed by fire in 1973, the yews were a leggy twelve feet high, the romantic old walls and arches crumbling. Slowly, cautiously, Lee took the reins, removing trees, repairing masonry, turning some of the gardens into lawns and meadows. But mostly, she became guardian of the peonies. Although (being a great deal tougher than they look) they had survived, there was work to be done. Lee freed them from the encroaching weeds, vanquished pests, and moved crowded plants to spots where she'd amended the soil to improve drainage. As a result, Linwood now has some of the oldest tree peonies in the country, ready to survive, like their Chinese and Japanese ancestors, for another hundred years.

And the estate? Lee is devoted to securing its future; the Garden Conservancy may play a role. But meantime, the fourth generation has become involved, as Lee and her niece are planning to propagate more of Linwood's treasures. Clearly, the place and the peonies are in good hands. *W*

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A photograph of a garden scene. In the background, there is a wooden building with a gabled roof and a small window. The garden is filled with various plants, including tall irises in shades of purple and white, and a dense patch of pink flowers in the foreground. A wooden post with a birdhouse-like structure is visible in the middle ground. The overall atmosphere is lush and natural.

INFORMAL PLANTINGS like the naturalized iris garden sprinkled with dame's rocket and chives (this page) are balanced against more formal spaces like the Italian garden (opposite, top right) with sculptures by Lee's father, William Henry Gratwick III, accenting the water rills. Top left: Any broken stems of herbaceous (red) or tree peonies (tissue pink) are whisked into vases. Broken tree peony branches are painted with tar to prevent disease. Bottom: Leicester, Lee's niece's English setter, patrols the grounds.