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Paeonia mascula

[Synonyms : *Paeonia caucasica*, *Paeonia corallina*, *Paeonia japonica*, *Paeonia sinensis*]

MALE PEONY is a perennial. Native from southern and eastern Europe to Asia Minor, and debatably one place in Britain (Steep Holmes) it has large red (occasionally white) flowers with many stamens.

It is also known as Coral Peony, Peony, *Pivoňka korálová* (Czech), and *Piwonia koralowa* (Polish).

In Sicily male peony can have yellow flowers.

Warning – the plant is poisonous (particularly the flowers and seeds).

In Britain at least male peony is a protected species in the wild.

Mascula is Latin (masculine) meaning ‘a robust (not weak) species’.

This is the only species that has become naturalized in Britain where it grows untamed on the tiny island of Steep Holmes in the Bristol Channel. (Some authorities have suggested that male peony is native to the Island but this continues to be debated.) Records show that various unsuccessful attempts were made in the mid- to late 18th Century by several people (including no less a person than the famous English botanist, Sir Joseph Banks (1744-1820)) to introduce some species to England. The plant was certainly known to some in Britain in the Elizabethan period (1558-1603) as records show that a Kentish farmer, John Bradley, had male peony growing on his land then. The plants on Steep Holmes have been celebrated in their isolated home by the English clergyman-poet, William Lisle Bowles (1762-1850) who refers to them (as do many others) as a native flower.

Male peony is thought to have been introduced to Syria, Cyprus and Britain by medieval monks who cultivated the plant for medicinal purposes.

Medicinally, in Morocco a decoction of the root is used to treat hysteria and spasms.