

*Paeonia officinalis*

**PEONY** is a perennial. Native to southern and western Europe (France to Albania) it has large, deep crimson (occasionally pink or whitish) flowers with many yellow stamens.

It is also known as Chesses, Chinese peony, Common peony, *Echte Pfingstrose* (German), Female peony, Fragrant peony, Garden peony, Hundred-bladed rose, King of flowers, King's flower, Marmaritin, Maupie, Nan pie, *Paeonie* (German), Paeony, Pentecost rose, *Peonia* (Italian, Spanish), Pie nanny, Piney, *Pion* (Swedish), *Pioni* (Finnish), *Pivoine* (French), *Pivonka lekárska* (Slovak), *Pivoňka lékařská* (Czech), *Piwonia lekarska* (Polish), *Rhosyn Mynydd* (Welsh), Rose royale, St. George's flower, Scarlet mallow, Sheep-shearing rose, Udsalap (Hindi), and White peony; and in flower language is said to be a symbol of anger, bashfulness, indignation, shame, and shyness.

Warning – the plant (particularly the flowers and seeds) is poisonous and must only be used under the supervision of a qualified practitioner. It is said to affect the kidneys and intestines and may cause loss of sensitivity of extremities, difficulty swallowing, coldness, cramps, nausea, vomiting and diarrhoea. (Official records in Britain can only confirm the vomiting.)

*Officinalis* means 'of the shop (usually the apothecary's or herbalist's)'. Certain plants used for medicinal purposes, whether of actual or legendary value, were kept readily available and acquired this name.

Named after Paeëon (a divinity in Greek mythology who was named as physician to the gods by Homer) and identified as of value in reducing the pain of childbirth, the plant was an ingredient in many ancient medicinal remedies.

Pliny the Elder (23-79) the Roman natural historian, claimed that the peony was the oldest of all the cultivated flowers known then. Although this cannot be confirmed records do show that the Chinese emperor, Chin Ming (2737-2697 BC) did cultivate peonies during his lifetime.

The peony used to be surrounded by superstition. People were convinced that if the plant grew near the home all inside would be protected from injury, and it also had a name for repelling evil spirits (if the seeds were worn as a necklace) as well as for deflecting storms. During the Middle Ages it is known that ground peony seeds steeped in wine were taken in an attempt to prevent bad or depressing dreams. However harvesting and administering the plant required a special procedure not unlike one of those considered necessary for gathering mandrake (*Mandragora officinarum*). One end of a rope was attached to a dog and the other to the plant so that the animal could pull it out of the ground. The plant was best taken at night during certain phases of the moon and then only if no woodpecker was visible (otherwise the ultimate patient could lose his sight). Unless this ritual was performed it was believed that uprooting a peony brought the extremes of bad luck. Also according to the English barber-surgeon and herbalist (the latter as a charlatan for many authorities), John Gerard (1545-1612) children wore necklaces of peony seeds (collected under a waning moon and strung on leather) not only to protect them from fairies and witches but also to ease teething and prevent convulsions. This belief persisted into 19<sup>th</sup> Century Victorian times when children's

necklaces, then often made from sections of the dried roots, were referred to as 'piney beads'.

Although medicinally from the 16<sup>th</sup> Century peonies lost favour in Western folk medicine, herbalists have recommended dried ground root (and may still today) as an anti-spasmodic. It was used for treating convulsions and was also given to women immediately after childbirth. The root has been employed apparently successfully in the treatment of various nervous disorders, including epilepsy and St. Vitus's dance. Peonies are still part of traditional Chinese medicine today.

It is the birthday flower for 21<sup>st</sup> July.