



## *A Century of Blooms*

### A History of the Peony Garden at Nichols Arboretum

Robert Grese

The Peony Garden at Nichols Arboretum is rooted in the friendship of two men, both peony enthusiasts and both connected to the University of Michigan. One, Aubrey Tealdi, headed both the landscape architecture program at the university as well as Nichols Arboretum. The other, William Erastus (W. E.) Upjohn, was a graduate of the university and the founder of the company that bore his name—the Upjohn Pharmaceutical Company of Kalamazoo, Michigan. Sometime before 1920, they came to know each other, and Upjohn engaged the Italian-born Tealdi to help him create his garden of peonies at his Brook Lodge property, just outside Kalamazoo. Together they developed the idea for a public display garden of peonies at Nichols Arboretum.<sup>1</sup>

Tealdi was born in Florence, Italy around 1881. He studied at the Italian Naval Academy where he gained a thorough knowledge of engineering and spent time in England, where he became familiar with the designs of Capability Brown and Humphrey Repton as well as the writings of William Robinson and Gertrude Jekyll. It's not clear that he ever acquired a professional degree in landscape gardening or architecture. Still, after visiting relatives in Chicago in 1907, he was hired by Ossian Cole Simonds to join his landscape architecture firm.<sup>2</sup>

Simonds had graduated from the University of Michigan with a degree in engineering in 1878, and by 1907 had established a broad-ranging practice throughout the United



William Erastus (W. E.) Upjohn



Aubrey Tealdi

States but with a particular focus on the Midwestern landscape. He is considered to be one of the originators of the “prairie style” of landscape gardening.<sup>3</sup> In 1905, he had been hired by the City of Ann Arbor to lay out several parks and boulevards around the city. He was also hired to design the University of Michigan’s botanical garden, a joint project of the city and university, in 1906. While working on those projects, he began giving lectures on landscape design at the university and ultimately convinced the university to establish a program. At Simond’s urging, Tealdi was hired as the first instructor in landscape gardening in 1909. Tealdi was assigned responsibility for the former botanical gardens property in 1914 and became director when the property was renamed Nichols Arboretum in 1923.<sup>4</sup> Tealdi was named Professor of Landscape Design in 1919 and served as chair of the program until his retirement in 1934.<sup>5</sup>

W. E. Upjohn, was a graduate of the University of Michigan (1875) and founded the Upjohn Pharmaceutical Company in 1886. The company became known for creating “friable” pills that were easily digested. By the early 1900s he had become a passionate collector and evaluator of herbaceous peonies. Together with Tealdi, he was active in the American Peony Society, serving as treasurer for a term beginning in 1923. Upjohn amassed a renowned collection of peonies at his rural Brook Lodge Estate near Kalamazoo. It held over six hundred cultivars across many acres of display beds. Upjohn enjoyed opening his private collection to the public—free of charge—during the bloom season. He also kept meticulous track of his peonies and privately published the essay “Brook Lodge Gardens—Peonies” (an excerpt is included in this book), which methodically articulates his opinions of their virtues and diverse intriguing facts, peony by peony.

By 1922, Tealdi and Upjohn had decided to create a peony garden at Nichols Arboretum, and Upjohn offered divisions of his peony collection to his alma mater. Upjohn’s gift helped to establish one of the most cherished historical collections of peonies anywhere in the United States and Canada. It is enjoyed by thousands of visitors each year when the peonies are in bloom in early June. Many of the cultivars that he and others donated appear in the Peony Garden to this day in the same location they were planted a century ago.

While Tealdi’s general approach to garden design tended more to the naturalistic as was the emphasis in O. C. Simonds’ office, he chose a strong rectilinear order for the peony garden. Plants were carefully arranged in pairs in ten rows of square beds with fifteen varieties per bed. Each bed was identified by a concrete marker, and visitors were given maps from which they could match each





Red Charm

plant's location to its name and get to know individual cultivars. This system allowed for easy identification without the need for individual plant labels.<sup>6</sup> Tealdi harbored strong democratic notions of garden design, hoping to empower the general public:

It has been said that landscape gardening is for the rich, but nothing could be more unreasonable than that. Get a B pencil and a rough piece of paper and a \$50 Ford and go out and sketch a beautiful picture. It may be the highest kind of art in the results. The same thing is true in gardening. A few packets of seeds and a few plants combined with the feelings which will make a picture, and good hard honest work will get results that money cannot buy.<sup>7</sup>

If creating gardens is a democratic art, peonies are among the most democratic flowers—easily passed down in families and shared among friends. Growing in regions of North America wherever lilacs—among the most treasured woody plants—grow, peonies have





long been one of the most treasured herbaceous flowers. Blooming in mid to late spring, they provide cut flowers for home display and wedding bouquets, for graduation celebrations and other important family events. Until the mid-1960s, when the University of Michigan moved up the date of graduation, peony blooms coincided with the June commencement, adding “a special burst of beauty to the “end-of-school year activities.”<sup>8</sup> In June 1935, the *Ann Arbor News* noted that “millions upon millions” of peony flowers were in bloom during June and that they combined to give Ann Arbor “a distinctive charm in the glamorous days, the lingering twilights, and the moon-lit nights of the commencement period.”<sup>9</sup>

When the garden officially opened to the public in 1927, the *Ann Arbor News* described the garden as “a riot of color, of crimson, rose and shell pink intermingled with fluffy pompoms of creamy white.”<sup>10</sup> The reporter covering the opening had this to say about the garden:

There are peonies such as the amateur gardener dreams of growing but has little hopes of realizing—peonies so large they resemble giant fluff

*Facing page:* The popular local monthly, the *Ann Arbor Observer*, has used the Peony Garden four times in the last several decades. This cover using a lovely pastel of the garden by Janet Kohler, is from May 2014. Courtesy the *Ann Arbor Observer*.



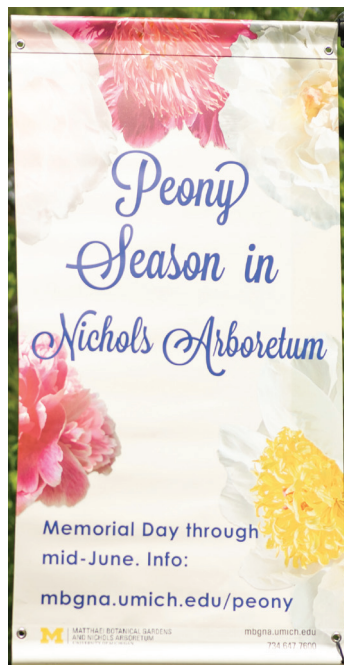
balls or chrysanthemums of unusual coloring. Solid masses of petals of waxy texture, single blooms resembling huge tulips, others like massive roses, and still others so regular and perfect in formation as to remind one of the old-fashioned flowers that grace mother's hat now reposing in the attic. In fact, there are nearly three hundred varieties represented in the array.<sup>11</sup>

As with many other cities in the Midwest, peonies graced private gardens throughout the city. Two gardens were especially noted for their beauty, and their owners routinely invited the public to come enjoy the peony flowers. Local hardware store owner Andrew Muehlig invited the public to visit his private garden with 372 varieties of peonies. Likewise, construction company owner Carl Weinberg dazzled visitors with 300 varieties and offered a wide variety for sale when the roots were divided each August.<sup>12</sup>

Over the years, the Peony Garden has come to be regarded as a sacred space for the Ann Arbor community, a not-to-be-missed sensation when peonies are in bloom. The rather short period of peak bloom—about two weeks each year—only broadens the appeal of the garden. If you miss the peak bloom time, you have to wait a full year.

During the garden's early years, people were allowed to drive through the arboretum ("the Arb," as locals called it), and callous visitors would drive wherever they wanted, damaging plantings in the process. Surrounding the garden with a chain-link fence and opening it only during bloom time seemed like a logical solution. Climbing roses were planted along the north side of the fence, disguising it and adding another attractive feature to the garden. In this early period, it was open only from two or three in the afternoon until eight at night. After cars were banned throughout Nichols Arboretum, the fence was removed and the pathway through the Peony Garden became a regular entrance for people accessing the arboretum from Washington Heights. After the Burnham House was moved to this location in 1999 and was named the James D. Reader Urban Environmental Education Center, Washington Heights became the official major entrance to Nichols Arboretum.

After 1965, when the university switched to an early May or late April graduation date, the peonies ceased to be associated with graduation time. With students no longer around campus when the peonies came into bloom, the bloom became more of a community than a campus event. After the Friends of Nichols Arboretum was formed in 1991, the group initiated "Peony Parties" each year to coincide with the bloom time. The parties evolved into







a rollicking festival with music, face painting, peony-themed hats, and refreshments as visitors strolled through the garden admiring the flowers. These art-themed events eventually became known as “Arbfest.” Choosing the exact day for the annual party became nerve-racking exercise, and occasionally the date was set too early or too late to catch the peonies at their peak. In more recent years, Nichols Arboretum staff have planned a series of events over the bloom period so at least some of them fall near the peak bloom time. The schedule has included a concert of Chinese-themed flower music called “Peony Blossoms and Pure Melodies,” originally in collaboration with the Confucius Institute at the university and meant to honor the Asian origin of most peonies.

Since 2000, the bloom time has coincided with the annual production of Shakespeare in the Arb, a collaboration with the university’s Residential College. The first of these plays was *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, which now rotates with other Shakespeare plays. These are environmental productions—the audience moves through the Arb with the actors, transforming the

Shakespeare in the Arb, celebrating its twentieth annual production in 2020, coincides with the bloom of peonies in the Peony Garden.







landscape into a magical kingdom. Many of the plays have begun in the Peony Garden, using the colorful blooms as a backdrop. Others use the garden as an entrance to the different settings in the arboretum where the play is staged.

While the peonies are in bloom, the garden becomes a delightful setting for watching the pure joy people feel when they visit. Some come dressed to the hilt, while others stop by on a casual run through the Arb. The garden is a popular place for wedding photos and families who come to pose young children against the backdrop of riotous color. In recent years, the ability to take casual shots with smartphones has greatly expanded photography in the garden. Visitors are as likely to see the blooms through a screen as look with the naked eye. People record their favorite flowers or take selfies to share with their friends. Others come to the garden merely to relax.

Patients, their families, and medical staff take breaks in the garden as respite from stresses in nearby hospitals. I've had people point to the hospital and note that that's where they go for treatments, but the Arb, they say, is where they come for therapy. A case in point is the story of Ginger (Visel) Ford who contracted polio in the winter of 1950 and was forced to go through regular outpatient treatments at the University of Michigan's Bone and Joint Clinic. After one of her sessions, Ginger's Mom took her over to the Peony Garden, and she discovered a true sense of peace among the mesmerizing blooms. The Peony Garden continued to be Ginger's "happy place" where she brought her own children years later.<sup>13</sup>

When Dr. Upjohn's original gift was accepted by the university's regents, they appropriated \$2,000 for the establishment of the garden and \$500 for its care during that first year.<sup>14</sup> Tealdi's geometric design of the garden provided for about four hundred varieties, with two specimens of each. The initial emphasis was on herbaceous peonies, with the intention to add tree peonies on the slope above the garden.<sup>15</sup> When the garden was officially opened to the public in 1927, the Regents appropriated another \$250 for a celebration.<sup>16</sup>

Tealdi sought to showcase peonies of known merit, with advice and input not only from Dr. Upjohn, but also from other peony experts and growers, among them A. M. Brand of Faribault, Minnesota (featured later in this book); L. R. Bonnewitz from Van Wert, Ohio; E. C. Shaw; T. C. Thurlow's Sons of West Newbury, Massachusetts; Judge Vories from St. Joseph, Missouri; and Northbrook Gardens of Northbrook, Illinois. He also received donations and advice from local experts such as Andrew Muehlig. Tealdi wrote an article in the *American Peony Society Bulletin* in 1929 describing the establishment of the garden and in 1931 published



Nawal Motawi created historically inspired tile in her garage before forming Motawi Tileworks in 1992, now a multimillion-dollar venture.

Motawi Tileworks' 4" x 8" Peony, available in pale blue and red, is a favorite among local visitors. Motawi spent hours adapting the design for ceramic. The result of the intricate process: a work of art befitting Motawi's beloved garden flower, although she wishes it could capture that scent!







a second article, noting varieties he desired to add and asking members of the American Peony Society to donate roots.<sup>17</sup>

Over the history of the Peony Garden, caring for it has fluctuated with the budget available at the arboretum and the priorities of its director and staff. As a collection of herbaceous plants, the Peony Garden has always been somewhat of an anomaly at the arboretum, with its focus on woody plants and natural woodlands. Peony gardens at several other colleges and universities have fared poorly over time. Cornell's extensive peony collection has greatly decreased, while the once-extensive collection at the University of Illinois has disappeared completely. Swarthmore's garden of both tree and herbaceous peonies is now focused primarily on tree peonies.

In 2008 the Peony Garden initiative began, an effort to fully document the collection as a reference garden, preserve historic varieties for the future, and raise endowment funds to care for the garden. A group of international advisers from the American Peony Society and the Canadian Peony Society joined with Nichols Arboretum staff to verify the identification of each peony in the garden. Whereas the vision by Tealdi and Upjohn was that the garden would continue to evolve, featuring newly developing peonies and older varieties would be discarded, the current vision of the garden is as a reference collection of historic cultivars.

What exactly is a *cultivar*? A *cultivar* is a cultivated variety or named selection of a plant. The precision of the term has changed as biology, genetics, and patent law have developed. Modern cultivars are genetically identical. These are clones of one mother plant. Peony cultivars introduced years ago were usually clones but some may be from sibling seeds of a particular hybrid cross. Many if not most of the breeders included in this book deliberately crossed different cultivars to create the new varieties they introduced.

The Peony Garden has become a nationally accredited collection under the American Public Gardens Association and has backed up many of its most rare varieties at other gardens throughout the United States and Canada. Today, it is the largest collection of historic peony varieties in North America, with target dates of varieties introduced before 1950.

Now approaching its centennial, the Peony Garden of Nichols Arboretum remains one of the most cherished gardens in North America and serves as a reference for other peony gardens everywhere. For visitors each June, it provides a place to be immersed in the mingling colors and fragrances of the flowers. For a while, time is suspended, and you can forget about anything else.