

# Tale from the Garden

On 6th February this year, Her Majesty The Queen became the first British Monarch to celebrate a Platinum Jubilee, marking 70 years of service to the people of the United Kingdom, the Realms and the Commonwealth.

To celebrate this unprecedented anniversary, events and initiatives will take place throughout the year, culminating in a four-day UK bank holiday weekend from Thursday 2nd to Sunday 5th June. The bank holiday will provide an opportunity for communities and people throughout the United Kingdom to come together to celebrate the historic milestone. We have plans for our own church celebrations so watch this space!

## **One of the commemorative initiatives is The Queen's Green Canopy ...**

As the Platinum Jubilee year begins, over 60,000 trees have already been planted in the UK through the project in the two months since the planting season began. Green-fingered communities and cities from Cornwall to Glasgow have come together to make 2022 a truly special year to “plant a tree for the Jubilee” as a celebration of The Queen’s 70 years of service to the nation and the Commonwealth. The Queen’s Green Canopy is generating the planting of large, celebration trees, new majestic avenues of trees, urban planting, and expansive new forests that will benefit future generations. Every planting is being recorded on a digital Queen’s Green Canopy map which will be presented to Her Majesty at the end of the Jubilee year. The Queen’s Green Canopy is also working to protect 70 ancient trees and woodlands that are a valuable part of the UK’s heritage and history and has launched a special training programme to teach unemployed young people new skills in tree planting and management, as well as a Young Foresters Award to highlight the value of trees to school children. The Queen’s Green Canopy will continue throughout 2022 and into March 2023.

**But why platinum?** In the UK, the metal and the colour platinum are the traditional 70th anniversary gift. Platinum is a rare, valuable metal that’s more valuable than silver and gold, and it has provided a fabulous setting for some of the greatest treasures that humanity has wrested from the earth. The Hope Diamond, possibly the most famous blue diamond in the world, is just one example of this.

All over the world, platinum is associated with luxury and prestige. In its role as a 70th anniversary gift, the metal symbolises the strength, rarity, endurance, and purity of true love. Platinum also represents integrity and truth. These noble qualities also are associated with the colour of the metal.

**Peonies** have been suggested as the flower for the 70th anniversary. While their growing season may be brief, nothing says springtime like blossoming peonies! The big, pastel flowers grow in large bushes and give off a lovely floral scent. The flower, which is indigenous to China and other parts of Asia, resembles a rose, and like that beloved bloom, is rich in symbolism. In China and Japan, peonies stand for strong and positive virtues such as bravery, honour, respect, nobility, good fortune, and prosperity – certainly virtues & qualities represented in our lovely Queen Elizabeth.



**Peonies have a long history in China...** Peonies are native to the eastern part of China – they’re the country’s national flower and have been cultivated there since at least 1000 BC. They first made their way to Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when many new varieties were bred in France by famous breeders like Monsieur Lemoine.

**...and in Great Britain.** At home, the Victorian nurseryman James Kelway, founder of the renowned Kelways nursery in Somerset, developed thousands of new peonies too. In June, trains on route to Penzance from London would make a special stop so that passengers could alight and take in the sight and scents of his 'Peony Valley'.

**There are two main kinds of peony you can grow...** Despite their name, tree peonies (*Paeonia suffruticosa*) are really deciduous shrubs and bear huge flamboyant flowers, sometimes the size of dinner plates. They're long-lived but benefit from having some of their oldest woody stems pruned out every year so new ones are continually produced. Herbaceous peonies (*Paeonia lactiflora*) die back below ground every winter, but their vibrant crimson shoots emerge anew each spring. These are the peonies that make such gorgeous cut flowers, with blowsy, silk-petalled flowers in white, shades of pink, coral and crimson.

**There's a peony for every spot in the garden...** Tree peonies fare best in dappled or full shade, while herbaceous peonies love to be grown in a sunny position. Both kinds will grow in most soils as long as it is not too wet over winter. Dig in some soil-improving organic matter such as compost before planting and scatter a handful of bonemeal into the planting hole.

**...but they need careful planting.** Peonies are easy to grow, but planting depth is crucial. Herbaceous peonies mustn't be planted too deeply or they can fail to flower. The crown of the plant should not be more than 5cm below the surface of the soil. Conversely, tree peonies should be planted with their graft union buried well below soil level (at least 8cm) to encourage lots of shoots from the base.

**You can enjoy peony flowers for months.** Peonies are known for having a fleeting season but choose wisely and you could have peonies in flower for months. A different species, the lemon yellow flowered peony (*Paeonia mlokosewitschii* - also known as 'Molly the witch') starts to flower in April. Of the herbaceous peonies, the widely grown, deep crimson 'Rubra Plena' is one of the earliest to flower in May. Later flowering varieties such as 'Sarah Bernhardt' will often keep going until the end of June.

**They make gorgeous cut flowers.** Romantic and opulent, peonies look beautiful in a vase, and they last well once cut. If you want to grow your own, bear in mind that plants need to be at least three years old if they're to produce enough flowers to spare some stems for cutting. Cut them just as those plump, round buds are starting to open and they'll unfurl fully in the vase.

**They're not just for the garden.** Peonies have a long history in traditional Chinese medicine, and they are still grown there commercially for their roots, which are used to treat inflammation. The name 'Peony' stems from Paeon, physician to the gods in Greek mythology, whose name, in turn, comes from the ancient Greek for 'healing'. Their petals are also edible – add them to a salad or crystallise them with sugar to create the prettiest cake decorations.

**Don't worry about the ants.** Peony species with single flowers will attract bees and other pollinating insects so they're a beneficial addition in a wildlife-friendly garden. But many gardeners notice they also seem to attract another less welcome form of wildlife: ants. The green outer petals that protect peony flowers while they are in bud ooze nectar. Foraging ants soon discover it and will feast on the nectar until the flower has gone over - but thankfully they do no harm to the bloom or plant. There's no need to spray, which could inadvertently harm other beneficial insects.

## **Peonies, Waiting, and Jesus**

We're going to look at three things peonies can teach us about God.

### **1. God's timing is perfect**

Peonies bloom slowly, but when the time is right, they dazzle. God's plans for our lives may be revealed a little slower than those around you, but we can use the waiting to grow deep roots in God's Word so that when the time is right, we'll be ready.

Isaiah 40:31 reminds us: "But those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary; they will walk and not be faint." It is the hard, unseen work that happens deep underground, months before we see the first flower, that sets the peony up for success. Without those deep roots, that preparation and waiting for their turn to blossom, we wouldn't get to experience the full glory of God's creativity on display. The same is true for us – you and I can bloom in the waiting as we do the hard, unseen, unglamorous work that draws us deeper into our relationship with God.

## 2. God's made all things to work together

Peonies and ants, according to one site, are like peanut butter & jelly – they might seem like an unlikely couple, but they're designed to need each other. If you've ever cut fresh peony flowers and brought them inside you may have noticed how many little ant friends travel along with them. Or maybe you've experienced how essential bees, butterflies, and birds are to the beautiful flowers we like to enjoy. We are not meant to lead and live alone either. We need others to work in our lives, helping us to open up, discover the gifts God has given us, and then use those to nourish and bless the next generation.

1 Thessalonians 5:11 says, "Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing." As Christians, collaboration instead of competition isn't something new. Putting others first, honouring one another, living selflessly and humbly is part of who we're called to be when we choose to follow Jesus. We need one another to become the best versions of who God made us to be – it's not through our selfishness that we'll bloom, but through our generosity as we work alongside one another, using our gifts for God's glory.

## 3. Like peonies, the good news about God is better when shared with a friend.

Have you ever had someone surprise you with flowers, just because? It's honestly one of my favourite things, because it means someone was thinking about me – not because they were obligated on my birthday or Valentine's Day. If I could, I would send you each some flowers today as a reminder of how chosen, cherished, and called you are.

Good things are always better when we share them with someone else, and Romans 1:16 is a perfect reminder when we feel unsure about using our influence to share God with someone in our lives: It says, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes." When you have something that good, why would you want to keep it to yourself? God sent His only Son to die on the cross for everyone – and it's our calling to go and share that amazing gift with the people God puts in our lives.

Maybe right now, in the waiting, it feels like you can't do that the way you're used to. We've certainly had to learn how to 'do' church differently over the past two years but waiting does not need to mean the end of our ministry or our leadership. Sometimes it's simply the beginning of a creative new way to serve God that we would have never experienced before. I heard recently that every book in the Bible has a story about waiting – and in every case you'll discover that the waiting is never wasted.

I want to end our time with a bonus way that peonies can teach us about God ...

Here you go: If peonies know how to close up at night for protection and to reserve energy, why is it a surprise that God designed us for work AND rest? Could the waiting be God's invitation for you to fortify your soul by resting and trusting in Him so that you can be ready to shine brilliantly for Him when the time comes?

