

# THE PICK OF THE BUNCH

With autumn the ideal time to plant your paeonies, Paul and Esther Simmons share advice from decades of growing these glorious cut flowers.

WORDS **RACHEL SMITH**

PHOTOS **SIMMONS PAEONIES**

With blooms and buds of striking colour and shape, paeonies arrive in a bluster of corals, pinks, whites, yellows and reds into the late spring and early summer garden. Their visit is short and vibrant.

“You love them all the more for when they come out in bloom,” says Paul Simmons.

Paul knows a thing or two about paeonies; he and his wife Esther are specialist root producers, their Christchurch-based business, Simmons Paeonies, selling to a New Zealand and international market. He came to paeonies through a long-held interest in gardening, and via medicine, optometry and forestry, purchasing his first 100 plants from the United States in 1986 and another 100 a year later.

“Paeonies weren’t very well known in those days,” he says. “Actually they weren’t very well known in the whole world – in the ’80s other flowers predominated, like chrysanthemums. I just caught the wave as it was starting. Today people say, ‘I love paeonies’ – you’d never get that reaction 30 years ago.”

Simmons Paeonies now has 3.5 hectares dedicated to paeonies. They grow all three types, herbaceous, tree paeonies and intersectionals (Itohs), although have been downsizing their range in recent years as they move towards retirement.

Paul has been breeding herbaceous paeonies since 2000, with a focus on breeding a really good cut yellow flower. Two of his registered varieties are now available, *Paeonia* ‘Seidl’s Super’, “a lemon yellow double, with lovely buds,” and *P. lactiflora* ‘Eternal Love’, a fragrant blush-pink double with “the softest hint of pink in the white.”

In 2011, they purchased 3000 tree paeonies from a business in Timaru that was closing down. Now they are one of the last propagators of the type in the country. “I’ve always admired tree paeonies – they are really quite spectacular,” says Paul.

Due to the sheer numbers of plants, they start the work of lifting and dividing their paeonies in late February, ready for purchase and planting in autumn.

“When the leaves have died down and put all the goodness back into the root system, it’s the time to do your divisions and replant your divisions back in the ground. Over wintertime, those bare roots that you’ve replanted, they sprout little feeder roots. They seem particularly to grow in cooler temperatures, so that, by the time spring comes round, all the feeder roots are in place and ready to go. The temperature then tells the shoots to come out and all the feeder roots are there to support it,” explains Paul.

“If you plant in late winter or early spring the feeder roots don’t have time to develop before the crown sprouts, so it just sends up a wee tiny shoot. And that’s where paeonies get this really bad reputation that they can sulk the first year. Paeonies are great survivors though. If a paeony was planted late and only has a wee shoot, it’s fine. It will sit there, not doing much, and the following spring will have its growth.”

In 95 per cent of varieties, a divided bare root needs to have a piece of crown with a bud on it and a piece of storage root, in order to grow and bloom. The other 5% of varieties have spontaneous budding and will propagate from any piece of root.

“The spontaneous ones are really easy for a gardener because they can just cut off a piece of root and put it in the ground,” says Paul, who recommends varieties such as *P.* ‘Coral Sunset’, *P.* ‘Coral Charm’, *P.* ‘Pink Hawaiian Coral’, and *P.* ‘Christmas Velvet’, as well as *P. officinalis* ‘Rubra Plena’ (known colloquially as grandma’s hat in New Zealand).

Paeonies are a hardy plant that like their space in the garden away from competition,





IMAGE: Cillian Vire

such as shrubs and trees, and despite what many people think, they do not need a lot of feeding or watering.

“I have found them extremely drought resistant. All my paddocks have never been irrigated,” says Paul. “Because they take all their goodness down into their root system, essentially their roots are the centre of their life, so in a drought they just close up shop for the year. They are really tough like that.”

Peonies are susceptible to *Botrytis* (grey mould) and *Xanthomonas* (bacterial blight).

Paul recommends removing dead foliage (not the woody stems of tree peonies) to prevent ongoing fungal infections and the use of a copper spray, which is a bacteriostatic and so inhibits the growth of bacteria.

In term of fertilisers, for those who are not soil testing it is best to provide peonies with a bit of everything to cover all bases – a general fertiliser with all the trace elements. Paul also recommends OrganiBOR, a controlled-release boron fertiliser.

**ABOVE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT** It all started with just 100 plants; *P. lactiflora* ‘Sarah Bernhardt’ is known as the most cut peony in the world; The peony nursery has been running since 1986; Paul and Esther Simmons amongst their blooms.





ABOVE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT *P.* 'Red Charm' is a great cut flower; From creams through to reds and purples, the peony colour spectrum offers something for every garden; The name 'Coral Sunset' aptly describes this beauty; 'Christmas Velvet' is the one variety Paul cuts; Autumn is the time to plant your paeonies.

Which variety of peony to choose for your garden will often come down to a preference of colour and what is available commercially for purchase.

"The early 2000s were the heyday in New Zealand for paeonies. There were lots and lots of really lovely paeonies but they are all dying away – lots of gorgeous varieties are hardly known now," Paul says. "Backyard gardeners offering things online, they are doing quite a service for horticulture in keeping the odd little lines going."

The company website ([www.paeony.net.nz](http://www.paeony.net.nz)) has a detailed list of tips on why paeonies may not be flowering as expected. In some cases, like all gardening, it comes down to patience.

Says Paul, "The life of a peony is really in the big storage root system. It's more akin to a tree than an annual. It's like planting a young tree. It takes time to wind up."

#### PAUL'S RECOMMENDATIONS

- *P.* 'Coral Sunset' or *P.* 'Coral Charm' – beautiful coral colouring and an excellent cut flower.
- *P.* 'Bartzella' – a strong vibrant yellow with a long flowering season of about a month.
- *P.* 'Red Charm' – a deep scarlet red bomb and an excellent cut flower.
- *P. officinalis* 'Rubra Plena' – an older variety that is a classic of the English cottage garden. It will grow even on the south side of a house.
- *P.* 'Christmas Velvet' – a lovely scarlet bomb flower. Paul only cuts one variety and this is it.
- *P. lactiflora* 'Sarah Bernhardt' – pink and fragrant, with the title of "the most cut peony in the world".