

# Mr Perry's paeonies *Mary E. Jones*

It's June, they're out. Beautiful, blowsy, sprawling all over the place. I've watched the buds swelling through May and today they've exploded. The paeonies in the huge pot on the patio by the front door are spectacular, deep red and so special. I can trace them back to 1955 and treasure them as part of my family.

The original clump was given to me by Mr. Perry who had them growing in profusion around the back door of his retirement bungalow. He must have been deeply upset when Hereford Council built houses for sale on the field running alongside his garden. Our spanking new semi-detached denied him any sun. We were newly weds, deeply in love and the week we moved in, I knew I was pregnant.

Mr. Perry and I became firm friends during that spring and summer. As heatwave followed heatwave, we sat outside our backdoors with just a chain link fence dividing us. He was terminally ill and wasting away while I, with my unborn child growing strongly inside, me bloomed, 'like one of my paeonies' was his gallant greeting each morning. I listened while he regaled me with memories of his childhood. He had fought on the Somme and had a medal and a 'gammy' leg to prove it. When the paeonies died down, he asked if I would like a clump. They were called 'Sarah Bernhard' he said, after a famous actress, but we have always called them Perry's paeonies.

Mr. Perry died while I was in hospital giving birth to our son, Richard. I mourned him but I knew how fearful of the future he had become. I didn't get to know our new neighbours - my husband was promoted and we moved to Cheshire. Our new home in Nantwich was almost built. 'You'll be moving in within a couple of months' said the builder, just before he went bankrupt. Nantwich Council let us rent a prefab. I planted the paeonies in an

old grey mottled bread bin with a rusty bottom and they travelled up with the furniture. They liked the bread bin, which was just as well because they lived in it for nine months before we moved into our new home. In fact, they became quite a talking point as they bloomed on the steps of the prefab. I found the perfect place for them in our new garden while I busied myself having a couple of daughters.

Then we were on the move again, this time to America for twelve months. We let our home and took our treasures, cut glass wedding gifts, my first automatic washing machine and of course, the paeonies, to my Mum in North Wales for safe keeping. This time the paeonies travelled in a bright yellow baby bath with holes in the bottom for drainage.

The winter of 1962-63 was one of the severest on record. Mum sent newspaper cuttings telling of ten foot high snow drifts. We heard our tenants had a burst in the loft. On our return, Mum said, 'Your washing machine is under a blanket in the shed and your paeonies are under a blanket of straw in the garden, they are both fine.'

Neither the paeonies nor I were happy with our next move. I am a country girl, and a town house in Wolverhampton with rows and rows of houses hiding the sun was not my cup of tea. The soil in our garden was stony and poor. It took a while for both the paeonies and I to put down roots and begin to flourish. Twenty years passed and the corner where the paeonies bloomed became quite spectacular. I carefully planted daffodil bulbs amongst the clumps for spring colour and Kaffir lillies for the autumn.

Suddenly, all three children left home and we could please ourselves. We moved to Shropshire and found a house in a village on the outskirts of Newport. Once again the paeonies were in a furniture van, this time in a pool liner. I had been anxious as to how the children would react to the move, even though it had been a family decision. They loved the village and we had our first

grandchild as a house-warming gift. Our new home had been built on the site of an old pig farm, small wonder that whatever we planted, went mad! The paeonies settled down straight away in the rich Shropshire loam and when they were in bloom became an absolute show stopper.

Retirement became a reality. Life was good, too good, fate decided. Widowhood came far too early - I suppose it always does, I know I was not ready for it. Seven years on, I decided

to move to North Wales, near one of my children.

This time, aware of the limitations of my new garden, a small clump of paeonies travelled in the furniture van in an old compost bag. How those paeonies sulked! Whether it was the indignity of the compost bag or the unyielding clay in my new cottage garden, they were not happy. I was! I was back in North Wales near the village where I was born. So, I bought a huge pot, filled it with rich compost and, once again the paeonies have become a great talking point when they bloom. June 30th is my son Richard's 56th birthday. After I've wished him 'Many Happy Returns' I will, as always, wish the same to Perry's paeonies.

*Mary E Jones gardens in Denbigh, North Wales. This lovely story wins Mary this issue's prize of £10 of Garden Gift Vouchers.*

