

Perils of Proper Peony Identification:

Nomenclature, a Problem of Past and Present

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One of the key foundations of the American Peony Society's mission is upholding correct nomenclature.

Nomenclature is a system of “naming rules” applied to a particular field — in this case peonies. APS has been concerned with keeping accurate records of named (registered) peonies from its beginning, especially as they are distributed to gardeners, commercial growers, and hybridizers.

Present...

Peony identification today is problematic. Peonies are popular, and there are literally thousands of registered and historic cultivars (plus a multitude of unregistered seedlings).

Numerous gardeners and growers are working to identify peonies in their gardens that have lost their names. Many plants have been passed down from loved ones, discovered in a new home, or shared from a friend. Peonies may have no names — or sometimes, wrong names.

The challenge? Many peonies look very much alike, making identification difficult for even an expert who has experience with numerous culti-

vars. Simple photos — often shared on social media — are not nearly enough to identify most cultivars, and more in-depth research will likely be necessary to accurately identify a “no name” cultivar. (See page 36.)

The quest for maintaining true-to-name cultivars is nothing new, as we look to our roots...

Past...

The formation of APS was predicated on the latter ideas of quality and true-to-name cultivars. The first *APS Bulletin*, published in 1915, addressed the same issues we are experiencing today. An excerpt from an article by A.K. Fewkes, as found below, frames this discussion perfectly and is as true today as it was more than 100 years ago.

Excerpt from “What Are You Doing For the Cause of the Peony?”; A.K. Fewkes, Newton Highlands, Mass. August, 1915. From *A Bulletin of Peony News, No. 1*. (APS' first Bulletin.)

To appreciate what has been done by the Society one must look backward to the time of its organization and call to mind the condition under which peony growers were struggling. Then no man could be sure of the name of any variety. Now the one who is careless,

or worse, with his names, is apt to be severely let alone, while the trade goes to the man who has been willing to make some sacrifices for good nomenclature, and who is therefore able to send out plants true to name. Then there were but few really good varieties in commerce in this country, and the standard of quality was comparatively low. Now, through the efforts of enthusiasts both in and out of the Society, the most choice varieties have been introduced, and the standard of quality has risen to an astonishing degree. This in all probability would never have been brought about by individual effort alone. The combined efforts of many lovers of the peony were necessary to secure such results.

Obviously, other problems exist with misnamed cultivars and the quality of plants received from commercial entities. Unfortunately, many peonies are offered through large commercial outlets that purchase plants from a variety of wholesalers. Sometimes these wholesalers do not necessarily work to preserve proper cultivar names or have no interest in maintaining the standards of the International Cultivar Registration Authority (ICRA) of the International Society for Horticultural Science (ISHS).

The APS has numerous commercial members, who have agreed through their membership with the Society to provide true-to-name cultivars. Commercial members are responsible for the products they supply and have agreed in good faith to forward

APS' mission. APS wishes to thank these members for their careful work in keeping peony names accurately assigned per the Registry of Peonies. While unknowing mix-ups sometimes occur, APS commercial members strive to supply true-to-name cultivars.

We all like to grow the plant we believe we purchased. As a member of APS, you can make a difference through practicing good nomenclature — for the good of all in the future.

'Sarah Bernhardt' – A Nomenclature Nightmare

'Sarah Bernhardt' is one of the most commonly grown peony cultivars for the cut flower and home gardening industries. This *Paeonia lactiflora* cultivar is a pink double, and there are literally hundreds of other similar cultivars in commerce today. Adding to the identification complexities is the fact that a cultivar may exhibit different colors, forms, and growth habits under different conditions; thus, **'Sarah Bernhardt'** may not look the same in everyone's garden! It's not uncommon for social media posts to show pink-flowered cultivars with this name attached, which are not the actual cultivar, but a near look-alike. Why is this the case? Numerous possibilities exist:

- 1) The grower assigned the name **'Sarah Bernhardt'** to a plant similar to the cultivar they believed would pass as this cultivar.

- 2) The grower received an incorrectly identified cultivar initially, propagated it, and then distributed it under the incorrect name (common with many peonies).
- 3) A gardener lost the identity and assigned an incorrect name. This is highly problematic, since the plant may be later distributed under the incorrect name (see #2). Peonies often find their way back to commercial growers from gardeners long after they were planted in the home garden. 🌹

Can you identify the correct 'Sarah Bernhardt'?



Answer on next page.

SOCIAL MEDIA

The Good, Bad, and Ugly of Sharing

A common practice to identify unknown peony cultivars is to post images on social media platforms asking for a cultivar name. Social media is a wonderful way to exhibit our beautiful flowers, but it does not allow for the numerous details required to identify a cultivar.

Unfortunately, image quality, color variability, growing climate, and numerous other variables may cause confusion and misidentification. Then there is often limited experience with the many possible cultivars by well-meaning participating group members. It's easy to get things wrong.

Most experienced growers often look at many variables, including reproductive structures, leaf and stem structures, bloom time, fragrance, opening qualities, emergence characteristics, and a multitude of other considerations to identify a cultivar — all which cannot be depicted in a simple image of the flower or plant posted online. Typically, experienced peony lovers are reluctant to assign names to unidentified peonies due to the many possible outcomes.

That's why you see the APS Social Media Team strive to caption all cultivars shown on our platforms. Administrators frequently respond to requests to identify mystery peonies on these platforms with answers like: "There are thousands of registered peonies, many of which look similar or nearly identical. Identifying a peony from an image on a given day is nearly impossible, and APS recommends avoidance of assigning a name that could be incorrect and cause issues in coming years. Knowing the name is certainly nice, **but the real enjoyment comes from growing and seeing our beloved peonies bloom!**"

APS' recommendation with unidentified peonies is to enjoy the plant and to **not** assign the unidentified plant a name, which may cause issues in the future. As painful as this sounds (we'd all like to know what we are growing) it is actually beneficial to the peony world to avoid causing further mix-ups. Since peonies can live for such a long time and there are many near look-alikes, there is a good chance a misidentified peony may end up in commerce at some time in the future, only to cause further problems for those who purchase it.

A = *P. lactiflora* seedling
B = 'Reine Deluxe'
C = 'Alexander Fleming'
D = 'Sarah Bernhardt'
E = 'Sarah Bernhardt'