

# The

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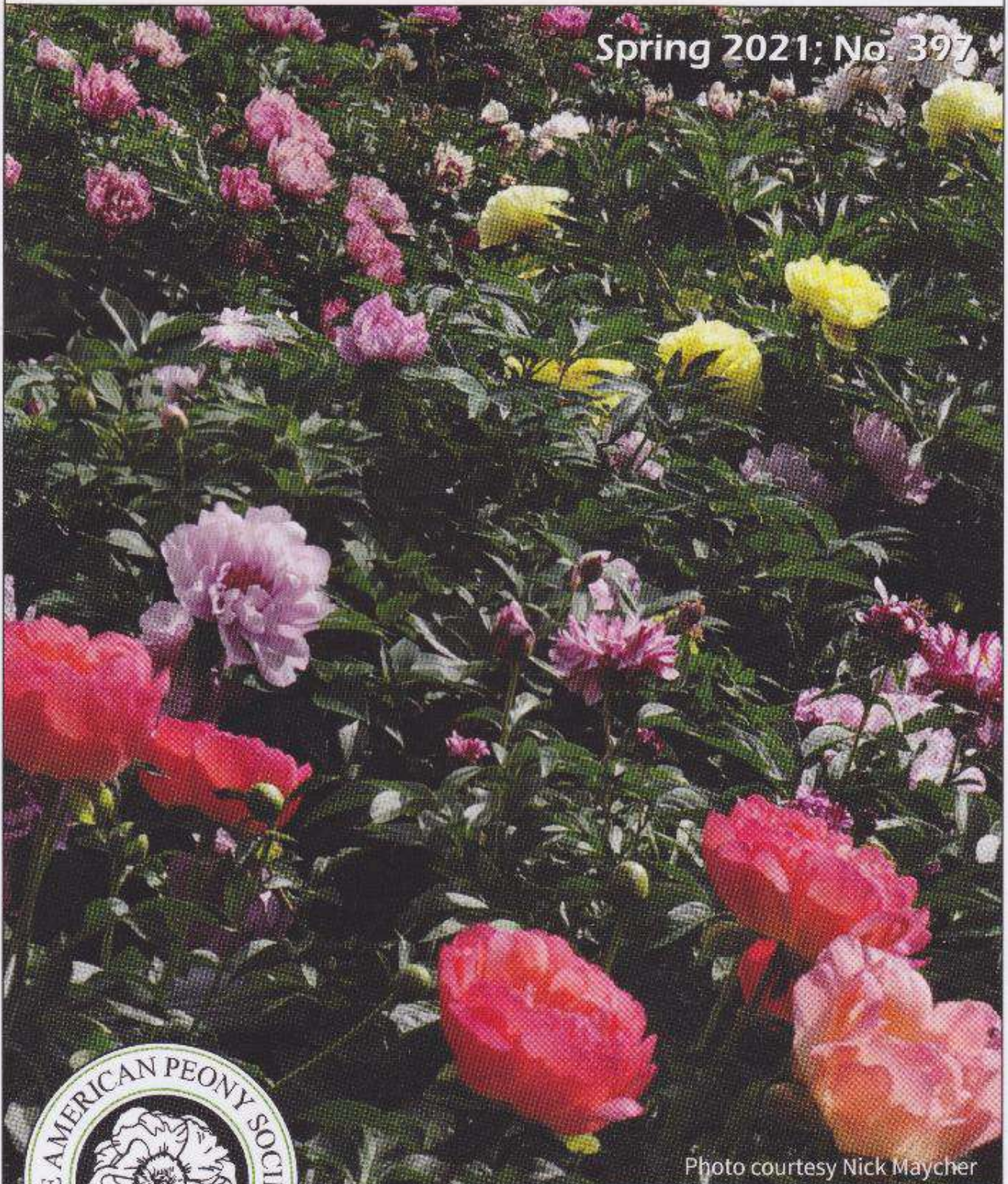


Photo courtesy Nick Maycher



## Anticipation...

# *Conservatoire de la Pivoine at the Château de Sourches*

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Friends of the peony, I greet you warmly from a small part of land in France called Sourches.

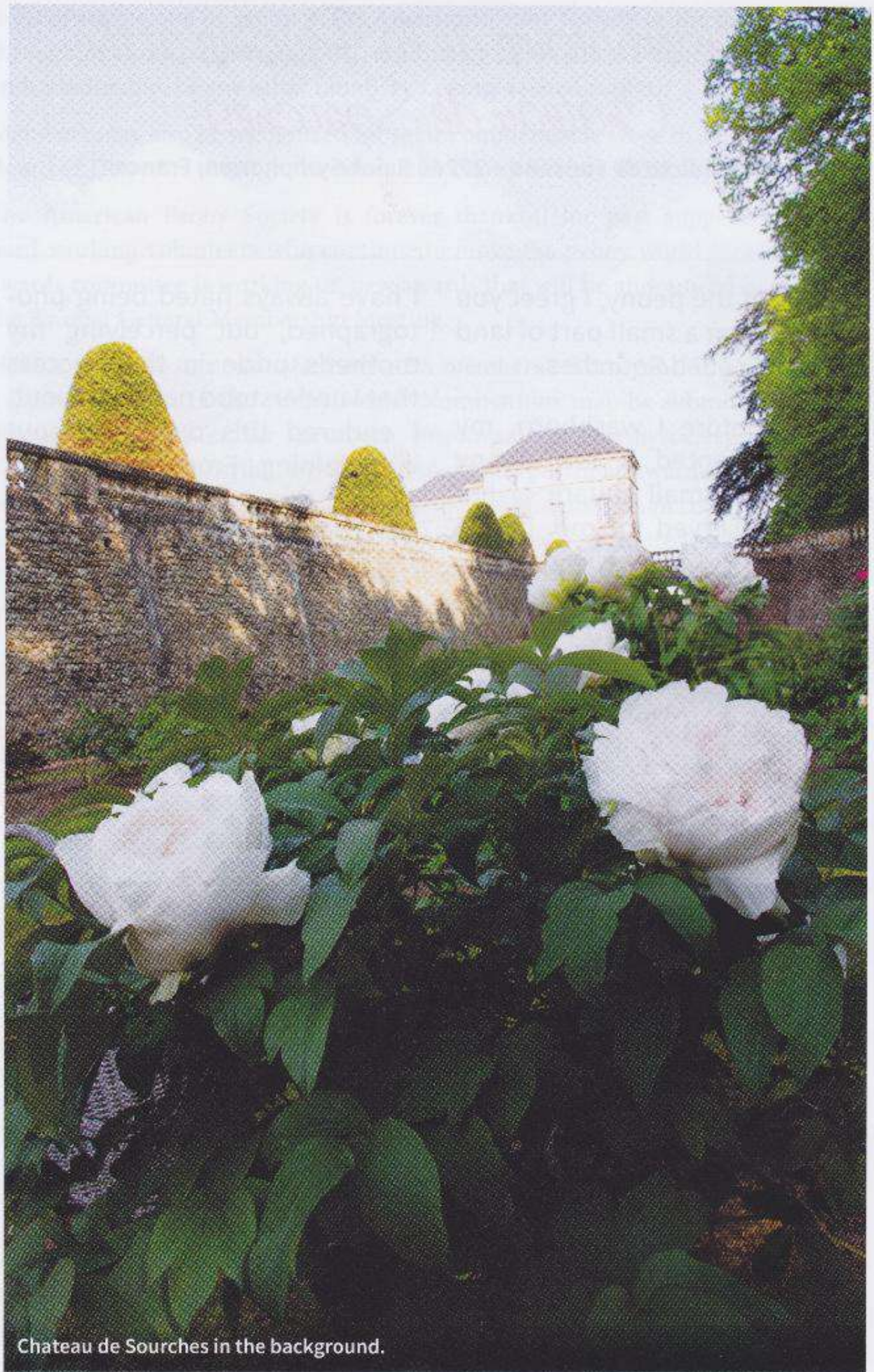
A little before I was born, my mother planted a few peony seeds in a small square of her garden reserved for me. I have no memory of their development. I only remember that the place was important for me as I loved nature. Bordered by a low and protective hedge on one side and by two apricot trees, two pear trees and a cherry tree growing big and juicy dark cherries on the other side, not far from the tool shed where I used to create rings and bracelets with wire, close to the kennel of my dog Diane who was my best friend for confidences and nonsense, this place was my refuge.

In the spring of 1976, 8 years after my birth, my mother, whose other passion was black and white photography, wanted to immortalize her Paeonnian success. She asked me to change dresses, aprons and hairstyles to pose in the famous flower bed where all the flowers bloomed.

I have always hated being photographed, but perceiving my mother's pride in this success that I understood nothing about, I endured this ordeal without complaining. From this immersion in the peony, I remember the brightness of the rose camaieu, the softness and suppleness of the petals, the power of the perfume, the roundness of the flowers, and the buzzing of the bees rolling in the pollen. It was beautiful. I have never forgotten that moment.



Author at age 7 in her mother's peony garden.



Chateau de Sourches in the background.



In 2003, with my friends Lorraine and Marie Blanche, I visited Amsterdam. As a souvenir of the trip, we brought back peony roots with the firm intention of starting a collection. My friends already had an organized garden where their peonies naturally found their place. As far as I was concerned, it was more complicated. To protect them from the wild boar's frenzied assaults of greed, I planted them in large clay pots near one of the park's pavilions. I discovered the following spring that, if they had escaped the snout of the boars, they had been a delight for the deer. I moved all the plants to the vegetable garden which was totally enclosed by a wall. There they became a joy for hares, rabbits and field mice.

A little annoyed by these recurring failures, I decided to plant everything in the dry moat which has surrounded the château since the Middle Ages. Peonies had finally found their place in Sourches! The deep moats, encompassing about 15000 m<sup>2</sup>, where my collection still remains offer perfect protection against the winds and the appetite of big game animals. The rabbits and other furry creatures are scared off by packets of my own hair that I regularly drop at the gates.

In the very beginning, I organized harmonious flower beds by color, size and flowering. All of them had to be able to offer a flowering plant from the end of April to mid-June. Ignorant of the world of breeders and even

more of the world of botany, I did what I thought was beautiful. Then, I dug a little deeper into the subject. I discovered Professor Saunders, Guerin, the whole Riviere dynasty, Daphnis, Itoh, and Lemoine, all these breeders unknown to the general public. I learned about *P. suffruticosa*, *P. lutea* and *P. lutea ludlowii*, the famous *P. rockii* and their formidable genetic potential. I delved into the world of the crossbreeding of Itoh (subject of my fourth book, in progress) and his successors such as Anderson, Smith, Hollingsworth, and Rat. I am still struggling with diploids and triploids but I am learning every day...

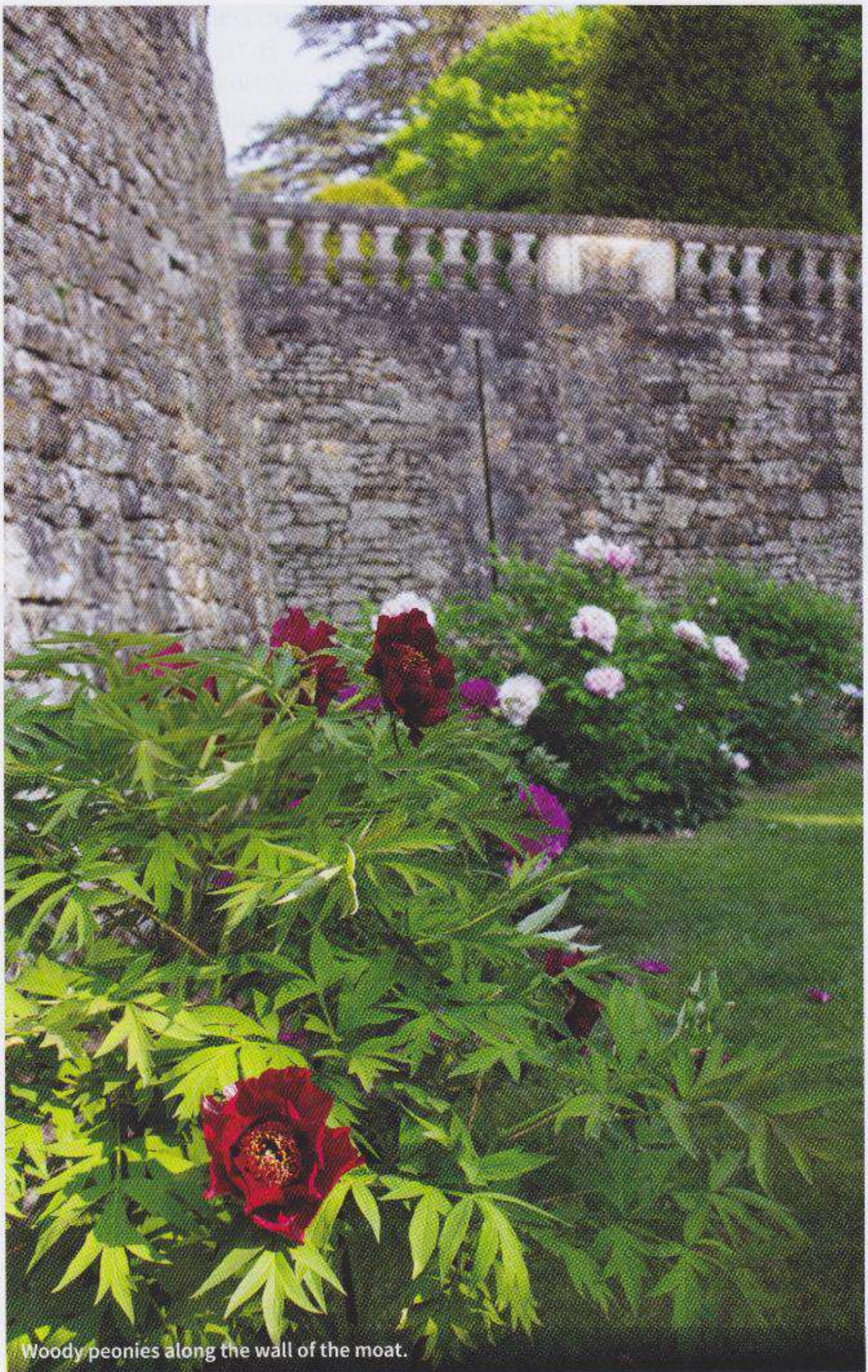
So, little by little, I modified the flower beds, or more exactly, I constructed other flower beds dedicated to the breeders. The Saunders' one is the largest for he created both shrubby and herbaceous masterpieces. Surrounding a massive bed of Klehm peonies, there are those of Calot, Krekler, obviously Guérin, and not far away, those of Dessert and Méchin, in order to help me keep track of their affiliations and parentage. I have also created a so-called genealogical grouping with several generations of tree and herbaceous plants. Two others are dedicated to species which, as you know, are the basis of all crosses. In

order to explain to visitors the creation of an intersectional peony, '**Kakoden**', '**Mrs Alice Harding**' (Lemoine, 1935) and Itoh's yellows will be moved next fall to form an independent island. I will do the same thing with Thierry Rat's intersectional hybrids of which I am absolutely sure of the parentage.

This conservatory now counts nearly 3200 plants of 2688 varieties in the dry moat and, in the past 2 years, overflows onto the counterscarp. It represents an exceptional pollen and seed bank and a walk for the visitors who leave smiling and happy.

It's an enchantment of which I never tire. In order to safely share it with everybody during this time when travelling represents a danger, I'm planning to shoot a short film that will be available on my website [www.chateaude-sourches.com](http://www.chateaude-sourches.com) next spring. I am convinced it will help the world to see « *la vie en rose* ».

Parallel to my research of plants and their planting in the best place, I am creating a collection of watercolors of peonies of Sourches. The ultimate goal of this anthology is to publish an encyclopedia of the peony inspired by what Redouté did for the roses. Several watercolorists are working with me on this proj-



Woody peonies along the wall of the moat.

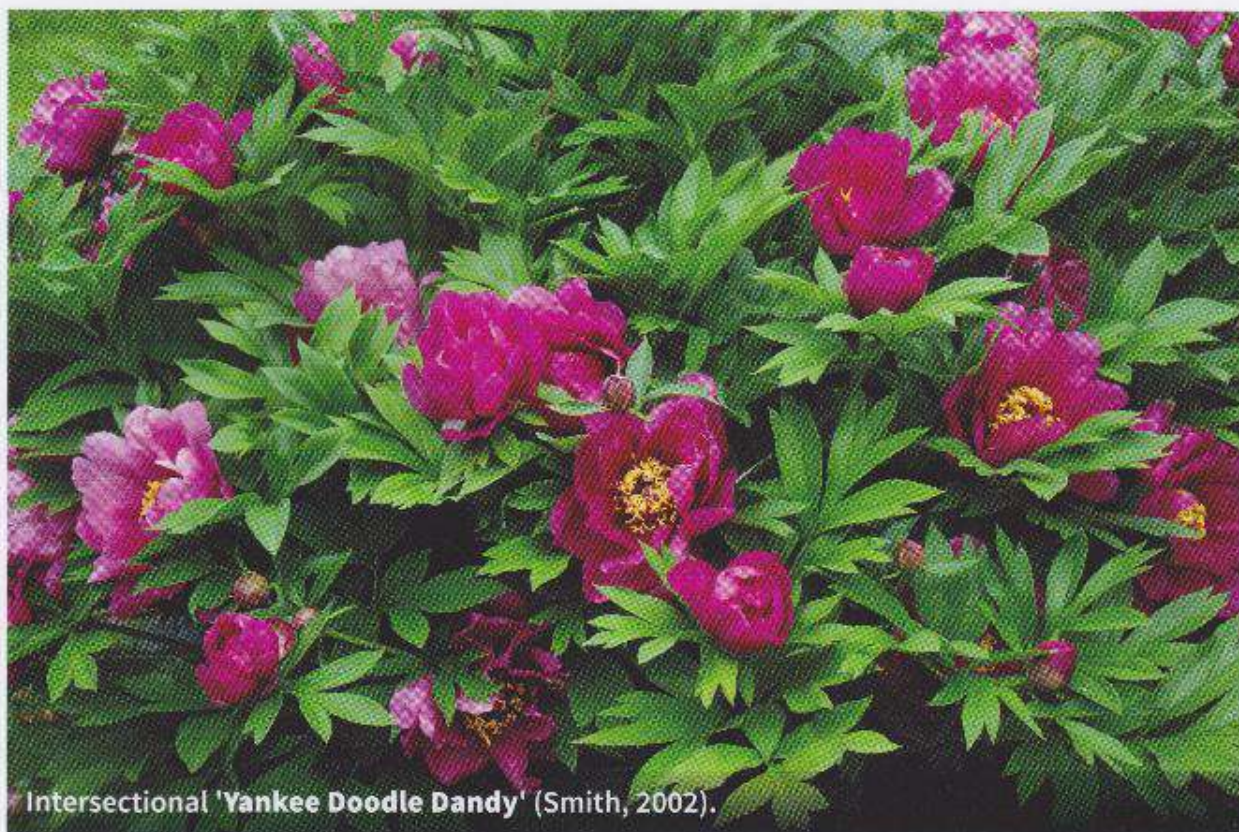
ect: Claire Felloni, Caroline Dumuys and Françoise Piquet-Vadon. They come to my home during the blooming season to sketch the drafts, estimate the shades of color and observe the evolution of the flowers during their bloom. Their art requires some time and I usually receive the final paintings in the dark of winter. What a joy to be able to see peonies under the snow! Last December 24th, Caroline Dumuys sent a photo of '**Strawberry Blush**' (Anderson, 2010) completed. What a great Christmas gift! '**Strawberry Blush**' is a twirling explosion of pink with very special carpels. It will be part of the fourth volume of my books, dedicated to the intersectional peonies. The quarantine having turned everything upside down in the spring, the fourth watercolorist, who had to prove herself by representing the peony '**Jeanne Cayeaux**' (Cayeaux, before 1937), a mandatory step to join the team, could not come to Souches, any more than could Claire, Caroline or Françoise. The harvest of the year is modest and I'm looking for better results next year.

**Les Miscellanées de Souches or Comment découvrir les piv-  
oines de Souches** (How to discover the peonies of Souches) have the ambition to introduce the common man to the peony

universe. When a publication is a generalist, it becomes ultra-light. If, on the contrary, it wants to be specialized, it becomes heavy. It's a pity. For 20 years I have been trying to understand peonies and I have been reading publications on the subject; I am always hungry. It is why I took it upon myself to write a generalist, though none the less complete, document about peonies.

In addition, there is an aspect that is totally unknown to botanical writers and yet so important to me - that of the history and historical context in which missionary botanists, biologists and hybridizers have worked to discover and perfect nature. Again, a pity! Auguste Dessert named one of his peonies '**Victoire de la Marne**' (Dessert, 1915), not because the name seemed pretty to him but because he wanted to pay tribute to the cohort of men, atrociously wounded, who were constantly arriving from that butcher's shop of WWI at the Château de Chenonceau, transformed into a military hospital, often to die. Auguste Dessert was the mayor of the commune of Chenonceaux and Victoire de la Marne; his peony is not only a flower, it is an historical sanctuary.

Similarly, Hiss, who wished to honor the Emperor Napoleon by



Intersectional 'Yankee Doodle Dandy' (Smith, 2002).

naming peonies '**Imperatrice Josephine**' (Hiss, 1839) or "Napoleoniana" among others, regretted having to wait 15 years between a tree peony seed and its first flowers. So, by the time he could name these peonies, they were not only flowers but a manifesto against the political system that was the Restoration. It is dear to my heart to put some of the peonies in their historical context; it gives another dimension to the work of the breeders, a dimension often ignored.

A peony is part nature and part man. If I love this opulent nature, I admire even more those men of talent and perseverance who are the breeders. Creating a peony is not pushing a button. Creating a peony takes time. Creating a

beautiful and unforgettable peony takes a lot of time. It takes knowledge, supervision, reflection and failures. Of course, there are some lucky ones, but the majority are hardworking, skillful men with many years of experience. With my almost 2700 varieties of peonies from all over the world, I can say that some of them are ugly. Fortunately, peonies have good genes, so ugly peonies are rare.

Most are so extraordinary because of their perfume '**La Perle**' (Crousse, 1886) or '**Zi Yan**' (Dezhong); their color '**Loyola**' (Chow), '**Iphigenia**' (Daphnis, 1977) or '**Black Panther**' (Saunders, 1948); the vigor of their foliage in spring and autumn '**Infanta**' or '**Late Windflower**'





Highly perfumed 'Yi Zan' (Dezhong)

(Saunders, 1948); or their abundant and original flowering '**Aurore Boreale**' (Cauderon), '**Eve of Radiance**' (Gratwick, 1996), '**Belle Toulousaine**' (Rat), '**Love Affair**' (Hollingsworth, 2005) or '**Futakami**' (Japan, not yet found the creator); really so extraordinary that a walk among them leads to a ravishing form of enthusiasm that we owe to these men. We should not forget them for all these small spring-time pleasures they give us; they deserve to be honored, and the Miscellanea of Souches has this intention.

While waiting to be able to buy the perfect peony from one of these breeders, one with abundant flowering, marvelous perfume, generous flowers high

above the foliage on strong stems, unforgettable color, healthy, lively and superb foliage, resistance to all diseases, and that will bloom twice in spring and at the end of summer, I wish to all of you a very beautiful blooming 2021. 🌸

*To date, Bénédicte has published three books on the peony. She is now writing her fourth book on intersectional peonies. She donated sets of her current books for the APS Fall 2020 and Spring 2021 auctions.*

Since 2015, the peony collection has been opened to the public during bloom season

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*“To plant a garden is to believe in tomorrow.”*

— Audrey Hepburn