

# Garden club hosts 'heavenly peony' talk

By Joy VanderLek  
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October's meeting of the Suburban Garden Club of Cheshire was all about a classic flower that is enjoying a resurgence in popularity — the peony.

It's a topic Dan Furman has been immersed in his whole life. His parents, Kasha and David Furman, founded Cricket Hill, a Thomaston business that has become a world-renowned specialty nursery often referred to as "Peony Heaven."

Dan Furman, not only is an expert on the flower, but is co-owner of the nursery. In recent years, he has enlarged the stock to include more fruit trees, but the focus remains on the elegant peony.

There are three types of peonies, according to Furman and Cricket Hill specializes in tree peonies.

"They're not really trees, that's a misnomer," he said. The plants are a deciduous woody shrub that grow anywhere from two and a half to seven feet tall and typically bloom from mid-May to early June with enormous dinnerplate-size flowers. "They are really the aristocrats of the garden—no-nonsense flowers."

In a PowerPoint presentation, Furman showed pictures from his many visits to China. Peonies were, at one time, all native to China, and were originally an important medicinal herb. "The roots of the tree peony in China are in traditional Chinese medicine," he said.

On the screen a picture of a 100-year-old tree peony appears. It's about 6-feet tall, said Furman. "When you see a mature tree, at peak bloom, it's quite a majestic specimen," he said. Tree peonies are na-

tive to China and the Chinese have really gotten into them, he said. However, the Japanese have been growing tree peonies for about 800 years.

There also are hybrid tree peonies, which are produced in the U.S. and Europe. Moving on to a picture of another example of a mature tree peony, Furman then showed an 80-year-old tree peony and explained that the trees do become heavy, woody shrubs. "Not quite trees, but really impressive," he said. After the bloom, there is then attractive foliage and a nice, gnarled, woody growth after their leaves fall.

More commonly found in the United States are the herbaceous peonies and there are many species, but the more common species found is *Paeonia lactiflora*. These are the peonies that are generally pink or white, and bloom around Memorial Day. They grow an average of three feet and have smaller blooms than the tree peonies; about three to four inches. "The issue with these is that the flowers are heavier than the stems, so they need support," said Furman.

A third type of peony, a hybrid,

Dan Furman, co-owner of Cricket Hill, a specialty nursery in Thomaston, brought in an assortment of peony bulbs as well as fruit trees. Furman is pictured in front of a fig.

| Joy VanderLek, For The Citizen

is called an intersectional or "Itoh" peony, named for the man who first successfully crossed a tree peony with an herbaceous peony. It's a relative newcomer, going back just 50 years, but most varieties arrived on the scene in the past 20 years. Furman said these are later blooming, coming on in the first week of June. The leaves and flowers are similar to the tree peony, but these get cut down in the fall — whereas tree peonies are not severely trimmed each year. Furman said with the hybrids, "You get these interesting yellows, and apricots, colors you don't usually find in the traditional plants."

Wild tree peonies have simple forms with a single, two-inch bloom, and offer interesting colors. "These are things that not many people have in their gardens. When you have everything else, then you start with these," Furman said.

