

# Kelways: 160 not out

Plantsman James Kelway (below) would have been proud to learn that the company he founded is celebrating its 160th anniversary with a display of Japanese tree peonies at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show this month, says **Jon Ardle**

**IN 1851 QUEEN VICTORIA** was aged 32 and had been on the throne for 14 years; the Great Exhibition opened in the Crystal Palace in Hyde Park; the Great Western Railway London to Birmingham line was nearing completion – and in the Somerset Levels, James Kelway founded a nursery, near the town of Langport.

His nursery, Kelways, has exhibited at RHS shows from its earliest days at the Society's first garden in Chiswick. It was part of the first show at the Royal Hospital in 1913, and since 1933 has staged displays at every Chelsea Flower Show bar 1994 and 1996, gaining 125 medals, 15 of them gold (five in the last 10 years). This year's exhibit in the Great Pavilion, however, will be special as it will be a re-creation of Peony Valley, the nursery's 4ha (10 acre) herbaceous peony garden.

## Early days

Initially, Kelways' main speciality was *Gladiolus* – by 1873 it had 800 cultivars and 10ha (25 acres) of gladioli in cultivation around Langport. The nursery gained its first RHS gold medal, for gladioli, on 6 August 1878. Kelways was also a major vegetable breeder, but it was for peonies that it became best known, having taken advantage of the opening up to the West first of China (Robert Fortune sent 30 tree peonies from there in 1851) and later, from the 1880s, Japan.

Initially the nursery imported from both countries herbaceous peonies and woody (tree) peonies, including hybrids of *Paeonia delavayi*, *P. rockii*, *P. ludlowii*



James Kelway (1815–1899), who opened the nursery in 1851

and especially *P. suffruticosa*. But it was quickly noted that Japanese tree peonies were better suited to British growing conditions. Chinese hybrids, often large and heavily double, disliked wet British winters and tended to flop. By 1900, Kelways had introduced more than 1,000 peony cultivars. It still has 510, and in 2000 Plant Heritage recognised Peony Valley as a National Plant Collection of pre-1940s *Paeonia lactiflora* cultivars.

The sumptuous, romantic blooms of Oriental peonies remained hugely

fashionable among Victorian gardeners, and Kelways thrived through the close of the 19th century and into Edwardian times. The First World War, however, changed everything, says the nursery's current Managing Director Dave Root. 'It had a catastrophic effect on the workforce in the big estates and gardens that were our main customers. If these did not have gardeners, then the nursery simply didn't sell plants,' he says.

Between the 1920s and the Second World War, delphiniums became a major speciality. Wartime proved to be another hiatus, but in 1948 Kelways bought the entire stock of irises from Award Nursery in Kent. These have remained important lines ever since. From 1950 until 1970 the nursery also had a major *Narcissus* breeding programme.

## Problems and recovery

Kelways remained in the family for much of the 20th century, but changed hands in 1987. The nursery, but not Peony Valley, relocated but falling sales brought financial difficulties and the company went into receivership at the end of 1993. It was saved from closure by entrepreneurs Chris and Liz Johnson, who

began its recovery. In 1997 they retired and sold the firm to Dave Root (who had joined as General Manager four years earlier), who has continued its revival.

## Staging show exhibits

Kelways is currently the only nursery to exhibit Japanese tree peonies at RHS shows, and timing their flowering is more art than science. For this year's exhibit (appropriately sponsored by Nomura, Japan's biggest bank), Dave and his staff are growing around 800 herbaceous peonies in 10-litre pots (12in diameter), 700 two-litre (6½in) iris, and 600 three-litre (8in) tree peonies. Around a third of these will make it onto the stand, but the nursery is also growing plants for no fewer than five of the show's gardens; 'Chelsea is huge for us this year,' he says.

The weather can be a challenge. Dave adjusts growth according to the conditions, often chilling the peonies to delay flowering and forcing the irises under cover. The week prior to Chelsea is the most difficult, and warmer than average is more difficult than colder.

Under Dave's direction, four members of staff build the exhibits with two drivers

and backup at the nursery. Flowers can be 'encouraged' to stay in bud with a wrapping of cotton wool, and recalcitrant blooms are often 'encouraged' to open on Monday with a gentle blast from a hairdryer before judging.

Dave admits the weather can make the whole process 'massively stressful'. But showing has always been important to Kelways. 'It is our shop window on the world,' he says. How many nurseries can boast a shop window dating back 160 years? James Kelway *would* be proud. ■

Jon Ardle is Technical Editor for *The Garden*

**Kelways Plants**, Picts Hill, Langport, Somerset TA10 9EZ 01458 250521; [www.kelways.co.uk](http://www.kelways.co.uk). Open Mon–Sat, 9am–5pm, Sun 10am–4pm

**RHS Chelsea Flower Show** 24–28 May, Royal Hospital, Chelsea, London 0844 338 7539 [www.rhs.org.uk/chelsea](http://www.rhs.org.uk/chelsea)  
● 12 June: 'Growing peonies successfully' at Binny Plants, West Lothian  
● 14 July: 'Getting the best out of irises', Doddington Hall, Lincs See *RHS Members' Handbook*

## DAVE ROOT'S TOP TEN PEONIES

### Tree peonies

- *Paeonia suffruticosa* 'Cardinal Vaughan' (right) Early, rich, sumptuous episcopal purple
- *P. suffruticosa* 'Renkaku' Early flowering, huge, single, pure white with fimbriated petals
- *P. suffruticosa* 'Yachiyo-tsubaki' Lovely coral-pink blooms, red stems to shoots, and purple-tinted leaves that give extra interest when flowers are finished
- *P. x lemoinei* 'High Noon' (right) Yellow, semi-double, scented; will often flower again in autumn
- *P. suffruticosa* 'Duchess of Marlborough' Kelways finest, huge, blowsy, pale pink flowers

### Herbaceous peonies

- *P. lactiflora* 'Bowl of Beauty' (below) Deservedly popular
- *P. 'Coral Charm'* Amazing colour changes – opens pink and turns through salmon to orange to yellow
- *P. lactiflora* 'Jan van Leewuen' Pure white, yellow centre
- *P. lactiflora* 'Mothers Choice' Lovely classic, blowsy pink
- *P. lactiflora* 'Kelway's Glorious' Perhaps the best peony ever? Massive white flowers opening blush pink



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Kelways nursery today, in Langport, Somerset



RHS LINDLEY LIBRARY



The gold medal-winning display at RHS Chelsea Flower Show 2010



Kelways' exhibit of irises at Chelsea in 1963



*Paeonia lactiflora* 'Bowl of Beauty', perhaps the most famous peony

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