

Royal Horticultural Society
Encyclopedia of Perennials,
 editor-in-chief Graham Rice, 496pp,
 2006, Dorling Kindersley, £25,
 ISBN-13: 978-1-40530-600-3

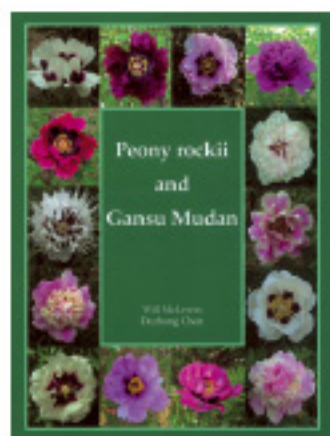
There have been a number of colour encyclopedias produced over the past decade, so is another large tome welcome? This work is focused on hardy herbaceous perennials, including grasses, sedges and ferns, a reflection of their rise in popularity. The focus of this encyclopedia is its strength and allows more than 5,000 perennials, including cultivars to be treated in depth. The accounts are full, containing not just the type of information expected but often additional notes, for example, on their introduction to cultivation. While written to be accessible to a wide audience, the breadth and detail of coverage will certainly appeal to keen gardeners and professionals wanting something more. Arguably the most significant work on perennials since Graham Stuart Thomas' *Perennial Garden Plants* first published in 1976, it provides a much-needed modern treatment.

A feature are the information boxes dealing with various subjects from planting associations, breeding work, details on problematic pests or diseases through to explanations of flower structures. Particularly useful are those dealing with problems of

fusion. By tackling and explaining these issues, this adds much to the accuracy and information content. The list of contributors is impressive, drawing on RHS expertise and specialist growers, and this is clearly reflected in the accuracy and quality of text. These features and the full plant entries justify the claim that this is more than an A-Z of plant descriptions; it is a definitive reference work on perennials.

The book is very well put together, fully and lavishly illustrated with numerous photographs of very high quality and reproduced to a size sufficient to clearly see flower detail. Although a few are slightly blurred this does not detract from the overall quality of production.

Touted as 'the definitive illustrated reference guide' this certainly meets the description and surpassed my expectations, taking encyclopedic works to a new level. *Tim Upton* is Superintendent of Cambridge University Botanic Garden



Peony rockii and Gansu Mudan,
 by Will McLewin and Dezhong
 Chen, 281pp, 2006, Wellesley-
 Cambridge Press, www.phedar.com,
 £32, ISBN-10: 1-96140-883-9

This book fills a major gap in our knowledge about Chinese tree peonies. The Gansu Mudan Group consists of hybrids of *Paeonia rockii* from the mountainous Gansu

The highly ornamental flowers are characterised by having a dark flare or blotch at the base of the petals.

Will McLewin has forthright views and some of the text is, to say the least, contentious. He is critical of traditional botanists and how they have treated the taxonomy of tree peonies, but fails to mention the difficulties they have faced in obtaining authentic specimens to study.

Most readers of *The Plantsman* will be fascinated by Chapter 5, which claims to reveal the true nature of the famous tree peony 'Rock's Variety'. Written in conjunction with Chris Sanders, the authors have presented a convincing argument that 'Rock's Variety' is a hybrid of *P. rockii* and not representative of the wild species, as previously thought. They suggest that the British form of the plant should be renamed 'Highdown', while the American is better known as 'Joseph Rock'.

Very much a collaborative effort between a Chinese nursery and one of Britain's acknowledged experts on *Paeonia*, the book is well illustrated with eight watercolours by Margaret Walty and includes several hundred photographs. It also includes detailed information on the cultivation and classification of these plants.

On the negative side there is no glossary or index and it can be confusing to find your way around. The book is encyclopaedic in its coverage, but many of the named cultivars look very similar and there is no indication of their relative merits. However, it is a valuable addition to the library of works about peonies and is certain to stimulate further debate.

Martin Page, President of the Peony Society and a Director of The American Peony Society, has written two books about the genus *Paeonia*