

The Peony's Way of Saying No

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Anticipated, admired and adored... such is the beauty of peonies. A stunning beauty that captivates the world with its multifaceted extraordinaire. Encapsulating elegance and regality in its rainbow brilliance, its beauty has long been ascertained and publicly acknowledged. Its beauty fears neither conflicts nor controversies.

How few have yet to admire the beauty of peonies? Yet scores of people pour into Luoyang city via planes and trains or cars and cruises, conquering mountains and seas with their fervent hearts and ardent hopes, as if they had agreed to all come here at the same time.

As Ouyang Xiu once composed, “thy soils of Luoyang are the epitome of flower beds perfected, akin to peonies reigning as the epitome of the ‘magic of flowers’.”

The legendary peony was relegated to Luoyang from the capital in a raging fit by Empress Wu Zetian. Little did one expect for the climate in Luoyang to be optimal for cultivating peonies. The people of Luoyang thus began growing peonies, a trend that gradually prospered during the Tang dynasty and hit its peak in the Song dynasty. Come spring time every year in mid-April, tens of thousands of peonies would blossom all over street alleys and gardens in full splendour, transforming Luoyang into a Peony City - what a magnificent sight to behold!

Thus, Luoyang has become a must-see site for appreciating peonies. Those that have yet to view the peonies in Luoyang cannot claim to have admired these beauties. Besides, the peonies of Luoyang have a little history behind it - its reputation stems from having risen above its relegation. This could have hooked even more interest in these beauties.

At the 9th Annual Luoyang Peony Fair, spring is running late on schedule this year.

Days of heavy clouds and dark rains have been sending chills throughout

Luoyang city in April.

The streets are packed with flower enthusiasts from far and beyond. These enthusiasts have kept to their yearly promised dates with the peonies.

Budding parasol trees, willows draped in green; peach and pear blossoms bloom in iridescence whilst begonias wither with a wistful grace. The people of Luoyang laments the late onset of spring just as flower enthusiasts moan on the silence blanketing Peony City.

This cold and quiet Luoyang makes you wonder if something is amiss. You gently shut your eyes, finding the scenery almost too much to bear. Taking a deep breath to camouflage your last hopes, you saunter into the King City Park. You believe that peonies love crowds; you know that unlike orchids, peonies are not accustomed to loneliness. You even harbour a thread of selfishness, praying for the peonies to accept this early homage of adoration.

Alas, only pockets of red and dots of white can be spotted amidst the lush greenery. Tens of thousands of full buds perch proudly atop the peony branches that reach up to half an adult's height. Shaped like peaches of immortality, these buds purse their luscious lips, lightly biting against layers of soft petals to exude an air of cold arrogance, adamantly refusing to bloom. A colossal kingdom of peonies, shrouded in a blanket of depressing greying green...

A weak ray of sunlight beams upon the peonies, trying its darndest to persuade these beauties... but the ladies stay arched and remain unmoved.

Confounded and crestfallen, you cannot fathom the peonies' refusal to accept its rightful glory and accolade.

And so, flower enthusiasts start to bemoan Luoyang peonies as being unworthy of its reputation; the people of Luoyang shake their heads in disagreement, highlighting that the peonies of Luoyang had never once failed to deliver like it had this year. They push the blame on an uncharacteristically freezing Spring and its endless streams of cold currents this year for the peonies' absence. Back when Empress Wu Zetian ordered the timely blossoming of hundreds of flowers to occur overnight just so she could view them the next morning, only the peonies refused to cower and bloom.

Unshaken, the peonies would rather be relegated to Luoyang than to succumb to majestic prowess. How then, can one expect peonies to change their persona easily?

Facing the lush green peony garden, all you can do is to visualise to your best imaginations. Picture them basking in the warmth of sun-filled passion; picture their glorious spectacularity in the spring - when peonies bloom, tens of thousands of buds blossom overnight, like a gush of almighty river thawed in an earth shattering moment. A moment of such imposing resplendence and awe-inspiring grandiose, it is as if the peonies had compressed a whole year of magical essence and it all gushed forth in that one moment. An outsurge, a torrent that can sweep a nation off its feet.

You may have kissed those colourful petals in your dreams; you may be visualising palettes of colours this very instant... imagining the skies of Luoyang refracted into rainbows by the sea of blossoming peonies, imagining trees and houses scented by the fragrance of these beauties, imagining the festive mood that have gone on for over a thousand years across Luoyang City during these twenty days that peonies bloom and wither. Imagining the disappointing remembrance this year has brought you, and the comforting hope next year will bring. The peony has woven a web of enigma and impeccability for itself - you have just taken a sneak peak into its personality in its absence.

In fact, a long long time ago, you didn't use to like the peony because it was adored as a status symbol of wealth. Later, you chanced upon the withering of a peony and was convinced that anyone would have been touched by that scene - whole flowers of these vibrant peonies breaking off in their prime bloom with just a touch of cool breeze, scattering into an alluring floor of petals. As the petals fall, they hold their heads up high celestially, like a sacrificial bird stripped of its feathers, solemnly humming to a heartbreaking tune on its way to its heroic death. The peony does not drag out its withering. It either dazzles on its crown of branches, or returns to the soil. It strides past the weariness of ageing and withering to vanquish death, choosing to end in its prime, at the peak of its youth and beauty. Gorgeous as it may be, the peony refuses to linger on lifelessly - even in its departure, the peony insists on leaving the world a stirring aftertaste with its grand exit.

Thus, a miracle will not happen in this cold, wet April. The peony rests perfectly poised amidst scorns and disgrunts from its enthusiasts. Pristine, tasteful, refined and uncompromising, the peony blooms to its own beat, maintaining its right to decide for itself when to launch its biggest annual event. Why wouldn't the peony resist the cold?

Flower enthusiasts from all corners of the world ceaselessly surge to Luoyang city. They refuse to deny the beauty of peonies just because the peony knows to say no. Even if the peony undergoes another ten rounds of relegation, it would only point to the possibility of gaining another ten Luoyang Peony Cities.

It is in this tranquil woefulness that you hit an epiphany - wealth and sophistication, are not synonymous. Just as humans, spirituality too flows in flowers. Tastefulness is to be refined by class - class being an intangible charisma that can only be defined by sense. You breathe in awe at how the peony stands aloof in its lone sophistication, and realise how easy it is for people to neglect or ignore the charms of a classy beauty.