Paeonia ostii T. Hong et F.X. Zhang
ev 'Phoenix White'

Ranunculaceae
Source of: mǔ dān pí 牡丹皮
tree peony rootbark

Summary Description

The old species name *suffruticosa* was found to be a catchall term comprising several species. *P. ostii* is the correct name for the source of mǔ dān pí, widely cultivated in China and used in intercropping schemes. This woody shrub to five feet in height, hardy to Zone 4, needs shade for flowering and fruiting. The plant is also known as fèng dān bái, literally "phoenix red white." This name evokes the spectacular terminal flower: a large (6 inches overall) white single-petal form with a prominent wine-red central disc ringed by red filaments and yellow anthers. "Phoenix" may describe how an established plant can regenerate itself, even if the buds on the grayish brown woody stems freeze off during the winter. Deep green foliage is divided in a complex pattern, highly ornamental. Flowers in early May give way to five greenish-brown velvety follicles, each tipped with red stigma, in summer. These pods fill out with 3/8-inch seeds that ripen from light brown to black.

Propagation

Can be propagated by division when the plants are more than 4 years old. Like other peonies, the seed breaks root dormancy before shoot/leaf dormancy. Seed germination requires a good imitation of natural conditions; the plants will (rarely) self-sow. Plant fresh seed while brown (the black color indicates dormancy) in a nursery bed. If seed is dormant, scratch the coat or use hot water scarification, soak 24 hours. Warm stratify 3-4 months, followed by 3-4 months cold. Sow seed 3/8 inch deep, press down, and cover with mulch.

Cultivation

After leaves have formed on the seedlings, transplant to individual pots and maintain until the roots are substantial (quart or gallon pot size). Plant out in spring in a well-drained soil with low organic matter. Mulch with dried leaves, needles or bark. A high canopy setting is ideal, with dappled light at most. Direct sun on the flowers will wither them before pollination occurs. Otherwise, the plant is pest-resistant and tough.

Harvest & Processing

Dig the plant in autumn when the leaves wither. Harvest all the long roots, or divide the crown to harvest a portion and replant the other. Wash roots, slit lengthwise to the hard woody core. Lift out the core which will separate easily. Cut crosswise into ¼-inch slices, dry at temperatures below 110°F.

References

Flora of China: http://www.efloras.org/florataxon.aspx?flora_id=2&taxon_id=242000596
Bensky *Materia Medica* page: 126

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