

Columns

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Peony's Envy?

Stephanie Cohen



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If you read this and laughed, it's okay. This Peony's Envy happens to be a new nursery located in Bernardsville, New Jersey.

The owner, Kathleen Gagan, came to her present occupation in a very circuitous route. A linguistics major in college and graduate school, Kathleen has worked in such varied locations as Venezuela, Taiwan, Maryland, New Jersey, New York and Singapore. Along the way she acquired a husband, two children and two dogs. Tired of the "corporate rat race," she decided to settle down on a property where she could farm and live a different type of lifestyle.

Her first farm-oriented endeavor was an orchard, which the deer ravished. She then thought about her grandmother in Wisconsin, whom loved and raised peonies. From her years in Asia, Kathleen could speak Mandarin and so she could communicate with her suppliers overseas. She had no difficulty acquiring Spanish-speaking workers, as she was fluent in their language, as well. Best of all, deer don't bother eating peonies. This might be the best of all possible worlds.

Although she started slowly, Kathleen has acquired 250 cultivars with well over 30,000 plants, and she's constantly getting new ones. She has wonderful display gardens, as well, which are open to the public from May 1 through June 15. Artists come and paint, photographers come to take gorgeous photographs, and—best of all—customers come to buy.

This new peony provider has been wonderful in supporting all kinds of causes, both locally and nationally. She donated 40 tree and herbaceous peonies to the National Arboretum that have been integrated into existing gardens. Kathleen helps Willowood, her local arboretum, with fundraising donations, and she's equally generous to local garden clubs. She helps her local Boy Scouts' troop and the cancer drive in her area, as well. Her motto may as well be "giving is good."

In the beginning, most of her business was garnered through word of mouth. In the winter, she speaks around the country and has booths at flower and trade shows. That helps expand her peony following.

Media savvy, as you would suspect, Kathleen's shopping cart is open online year round. Her website is her best marketing tool. After a lecture, she puts her notes online. This helps the audience concentrate on what she's saying as well as directs them to her site to see many more selections than she could describe in her talk. A member of the local Chamber of Commerce, Kathleen places ads in local newspapers, which helps support her local community.

And, since she ships her product throughout the U.S., she has honed in on *Fine Gardening*, *Horticulture Magazine*, and *Martha Stewart Living* to get the word out nationally. Kathleen also distributes a great newsletter with information about new plants, care and online specials.

Although Kathleen considers herself "a work in progress," when you talk to her you realize how energized she is about her plants and how much she loves them. When asked which is her favorite peony, Kathleen gave this retort: "The newest plant." Spoken like a true plant lover.

So, just how did she arrive at this unusual business name? At a dinner party where she was the only plantaholic in the group, Kathleen talked about her favorite subject—peonies—to everyone. One of her guests remarked it sounded like peony's envy. She liked the pun and ran with it. Most people chuckle when they hear it. Sometimes a few dour customers chastise her. Either way you won't forget the name any time soon. **GP**

Stephanie Cohen, the first recipient of the American Nursery & Landscape Association's Garden Communicator of the Year Award, is a regular contributor to Green Profit.