

A young horticulturist, fresh out of college and still wet behind the ears, was invited to speak to a large and prestigious ladies garden club in Dallas. He was thrilled, of course, and told everyone he knew about the great honor that had been extended to him. He was seized with panic, however, as the event grew closer. He had never spoken to an audience numbering more than a dozen in his entire life. Greatly concerned, he called his old horticulture professor from college and asked for advice regarding a worthy topic, something sure to impress the group.

“You’ll do just fine,” the professor assured him. “Just pick a subject that’s fresh and new.”

“Like what?” the exasperated young horticulturist asked. The professor paused for a moment and then suggested: “Well, instead of offering the ladies a planting list of great plants—every speaker does that—why don’t you provide them with a list of plants one should never plant in a hot Dallas climate.

If they heed your advice,” he assured the ex-student, “your lecture will save them lots of money and disappointment.”

The young student reasoned that the old professor had come up with a brilliant idea and immediately began work on his top 10 list of never-to-plant “Botanical Alley Cats.” Little did he know that the lead plant on his list, peony, was in fact being very successfully grown by many women in the audience. Never mind that the inexperienced speaker had never actually grown peonies. He was, nevertheless, certain that peonies couldn’t and shouldn’t be grown in Dallas. High hopes for a successful lecture immediately vanished when he opened his talk with the following ill-advised statement: “Growing peonies,” he said with all the bravado he could muster, “is not for pansies.”

The goofy line didn’t make a lick of sense, and audience response was harsh and immediate. Gardeners, least of all experienced female gardeners—“from Texas, no less”—hate being told what they can’t grow, especially if, in fact, they are growing it. Several women toward the back of the audience began vigorously waving their arms and murmuring in opposition. Another jumped to her feet

and with the loud and scary tone of an angry prison warden announced: "Young man, you are terribly misinformed! My garden is filled with gorgeous peonies." And for good measure, she boldly added: "My 2-year-old can grow peonies!" The audience erupted with scornful laughter. The young man, cowed and intimidated, broke out in a soaking flop-sweat and was seconds from passing out when the group's president stood and kindly reminded the group of how appreciative she was that their young speaker had driven all the way from Tulsa to be with them. The president's kind words calmed the audience, and the young speaker managed to squeak through the remainder of his ill-advised and much abbreviated lecture. The talk was a disaster! And yes, I was that young man. I learned several lessons from that awful event: Never tell gardeners what they can't grow; they will prove you wrong every time. And never talk about plants you know nothing about. As the fired-up Dallas ladies made very clear, peonies grow exceedingly well in Texas and Oklahoma. A cool thing happened a week later. A package was delivered to my apartment. It contained a generous honorarium and a lovely potted peony. A truly nice gesture and totally undeserved. Peonies are long-lived perennials that cover themselves with big, fluffy, fragrant flowers in late spring and/or early summer. They are best planted in early to late fall. Peonies have been known to thrive for decades in sunny, well-drained gardens. Flower colors come in vivid shades of red, pink, white and yellow. Check them out at local garden centers. Staying Gold featuring Danny Boy O'Connor video by Kelly Kerr Barry Fugatt is an ornamental horticulturist and may be reached by email: barryfugatt@cox.net