

Gardener News

Serving the Agricultural, Gardening and Landscaping Communities

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2017 PERSON OF THE YEAR



Kathleen Gagan

By Tom Castronovo
Executive Editor

Gardener News proudly bestows our 2017 “Person of the Year” to Kathleen Gagan, for dedicating her life to growing and interpreting awareness of the peony, a flowering plant in the genus *Paeonia*, the only genus in the family *Paeoniaceae*.

Her ability to interact effectively with the gardening public by cultivating educational relationships, has become an institution of learning and inspiration in the Garden State, and beyond. And we also honor here for being a true environmental steward of the land.

Kathleen Gagan, owner of Peony’s Envy, is a linguist and international corporate communications consultant turned lady farmer. After a successful life overseas, where she became fluent in Mandarin Chinese and Spanish, Gagan returned home to New Jersey to a life as an entrepreneur. She grows peonies because of their resilience, deer-resistance, and beauty. Gagan has studied horticulture at the Barnes Foundation, and lectures on peonies nationwide.

Her first career was as a professional linguist, specializing in cross-cultural communication. She has

(Continued on Page 24)

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2017 Person of the Year: Kathleen Gagan

(Continued from page 1)

taught English to Venezuelan oil engineers, coached Taiwanese financiers in the fine points of Western customs and helped employees of merging American companies navigate their new corporate culture.

After years abroad, she and her husband settled in Bernardsville, Somerset County, N.J. to raise their two children. Peony's Envy grew out of the fact that the land they bought in the Garden State was in farmland assessment. In order to maintain the property's farmland assessment, she planted 30 peony bushes, which were purchased from a local nursery, and when the deer failed to eat them, Gagan decided she might be onto something, so she imported a container of them – 10,000 roots from China. This involved permits and forms of all kinds. And lots of conversations with USDA officials and plant brokers. The newly imported plants grew. And after a couple of years, they bloomed. For several years in a row, she continued this practice and invested in a container of peonies a year for many years.

As the kids grew up, she began to develop the peony farm for on-site and mail order sales. She also planted a peony display garden open to the public during peak bloom, May 1 to June 15, all depending on the weather. Tucked away on the top of Autumn Hill Drive is a five-acre peony display garden, the largest peony display garden in New Jersey, and possibly the largest peony display garden in the United States.

Gagan also leases 12 acres of farmland in the Liberty Corner section of Bernards Township, also in Somerset County. Both of Gagan's locations feature over 170,000 peony plants combined. The gardens also boast over 700 different distinct cultivars of peonies.

Peonies are native throughout the northern hemisphere and have been cultivated for centuries both in Europe and Asia. The genus *Paeonia* is generally divided into three sections. However, for the purpose of garden design, Gagan has broken down the genus into four groups based on their use: Woodland Herbaceous Peonies (Herbaceous peonies that grow in the shade, hereafter referred to as Woodland Peonies), Tree Peonies, Herbaceous Peonies, and Intersectional Peonies. In the spring of this year, two acres of the Liberty Corner location will be open to the public as well for choose-and-cut peonies.

Jeannie Geremia, a contributing writer for the *Gardener News* and the 2010 *Gardener News* Person of the Year says that it is my honor to support the nomination of Kathleen Gagan, owner of Peony's Envy, to be chosen as the 2017 *Gardener News* Person of the Year Award. No one has exemplified passion and dedication to their chosen field and particular genus and species of plants than Ms. Gagan has in her love affair with peonies. Leaving her corporate world to become a lady farmer showcasing 700-plus cultivars shows the kind of spirit, risk-taking and courage that this country was founded on. Ms. Gagan is a true hero as she works to acquaint the public to the joy of growing peonies through participation in countless fairs, flower shows and programs putting her beautiful peonies on the national stage and helping to put New Jersey on the map as the Garden State.

This paper now wholeheartedly salutes Kathleen Gagan for being a farming entrepreneur, opening up her home's property in the spring to the public for all to enjoy the profound color variation of peonies, for having an entire garden dedicated to peonies and for making Somerset County in the Garden State famous. We also salute her for the time she takes to teach people about the flourishing population of peonies, and immersing herself in nature regularly. She is invaluable to the world of peonies, and someone who truly believes in the love of gardening.

Gardener News began the annual "Person of the Year" cover story in 2008. *Gardener News* will annually bestow our "Person of the Year" award to a person who performs exemplary outstanding service to the agricultural, farming, gardening and/or landscaping communities.

Editor's Note: Tom Castronovo is executive editor and publisher of Gardener News. Tom's lifelong interest in gardening and passion for agriculture, environmental stewardship, gardening and landscaping, led to the founding of the Gardener News, which germinated in April 2003 and continues to bloom today. He is also dedicated to providing inspiration, and education to the agricultural, gardening and landscaping communities through this newspaper and GardenerNews.com.

Gardener News

is

Now Accepting Nominations
for its

2018

Person of the Year Award.

*Do you know someone in the "Green Industry"
whose contributions deserve recognition?*

This person must be from the landscape, nursery, garden center or gardening industries who best epitomizes concern for, involvement in, and dedication to those pursuits. Or a person who performs exemplary outstanding service to the green industry.

The deadline for receiving nominations
for 2018 is November 1, 2018.

Gardener News annually bestows our "Person of the Year" Award in our January edition.

To download the form, please visit
www.GardenerNews.com and click on the
"Person of the Year" link on the left side.

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