



Intersectional (Itoh) Peony Culture and Care

Planting, Care, Propagation, Negatives and Best Cultivars

Planting

Planting is the same as for herbaceous peonies, but they may be planted somewhat deeper. A deeper planting tends to encourage new stems and a wider spreading plant over time. A 4 inch planting from the top of the plant to the soil surface is usually a productive depth. The crown and root systems on these plants can be quite variable in structure and size and are often difficult to fit into regular shaped planting holes. Laying the plant on a 45° angle often makes planting easier and plants grow very nicely after this treatment.

Plants do best in a sunny location with well-drained soil. Avoid planting near large trees and shrubs as root competition may cause poor growth and lack of bloom.

Care

Like herbaceous peonies, stems and foliage should be cut to the ground and removed from the garden in the fall to minimize the potential for disease in following years. Most cultivars appear to be completely hardy to USDA Hardiness Zone 3 and grow well in the warmest growing zones for peonies (zone 8). No mulching for winter protection is required after the first year in the garden. Plants are very disease resistant and seldom have issues with botrytis.

Propagation

Intersectional peonies may be divided much the same way as herbaceous peonies are. Crowns are much more woody and often require a small pruning saw to be used to create divisions, as a knife does not easily penetrate the tissue. Each division should have eyes and an appropriate root mass after the procedure.

When removing stems in the fall one may notice buds along the stems, much like their woody peony parents have. If one has the ambition, the largest and lowest buds on the stems may be grafted (as you would a woody peony) to produce more of the cultivar. We know from trials that buds that come from ground level or near that point are most likely to produce successful grafts. Grafting these plants has not produced a high percentage of 'takes' for us, but we have experienced enough positive results to know that it is a viable practice. More work needs to be done grafting these plants to perfect a productive technique. However, grafting is not necessary, as plants in this group are vigorous growers and are easily reproduced from division practice as used for herbaceous peonies.

Intersectionals seldom, if ever, produce seed, even though their large carpels (seed pods) look as though they are full of them. Gardeners that are not interested in seed production may simply cut these seed heads off after flowering to produce a neat looking shrub for the remainder of the summer months. If by chance an Intersectional produces seed, one should carefully plant the seed and attempt to grow it to blooming size. Many Intersectional hybridizers believe that the few plants produced from this seed will lead to more fertile generations of plants which will allow further development of this wonderful hybrid. Thus far, few positive results have occurred, but much further experimentation is required.

This group has also been heavily propagated through tissue culture and has made them more affordable for the average gardener. Most plants found in reseller nurseries and garden centers are from tissue culture propagation. Many of these TC plants may not have been grown to flowering size, thus the consumer should be aware that they may not grow well or be labeled correctly. In most instances we've found they do grow and are usually correctly labeled. However, the smallest plants tend to take 3 years before producing their first blooms and are prone to a persistent spiraling root system. The spiraling root system is the product of being grown in a test tube and then a pot. Plants take time to out-grow this pattern before producing the wide spreading root system found in plants produced from division. In any event, these plants are relatively inexpensive and widely available.

Negatives

One negative aspect of this group is the propensity for genetic mutation. Quite simply some plants change characteristics in floral form. This often manifests itself as flowers with narrower petals, or few petals at all. Once this process begins, aberrant flowers appear in greater numbers on the clump over the years, resulting in an inferior display. Some cultivars are more prone to this than others, while some, like 'Bartzella' have never shown this affliction. Notable plants that have shown mutation are: 'Lafayette Escadrille', 'Yellow Emperor', 'White Emperor', 'Rose Fantasy', 'Rosey Prospectus', 'Raggedy Ann' and 'Watermelon Wine' (among others).

Typically Intersectional peonies display excellent foliage, but not all do. A number of the red flowered cultivars show early dormancy and measles on their leaves. While this does not impact the vigor or flowers of the plants, it makes them less desirable as landscape plants.

Best Cultivars

Some of the best varieties available are 'Bartzella'--yellow, 'First Arrival'--pink, and 'Viking Full Moon'--luminescent cream-yellow-pink blend. All are very hardy and as easily grown as herbaceous peonies in our cold Wisconsin climate.