

October 2013 Don Smetana: Peonies

Don Smetana from A&D Peonies was accompanied by his assistant Keith, who helped keep the flow of invaluable peony information flowing. Don brought along a large 10 year old peony specimen “Vivid Rose” that was in need of division and was fearless in his dissection techniques. He explained that these divisions are much better attempted in the fall when their leaves have turned color, but can be done as early as August 15th if necessary, but no later than November 15th. Generally, peonies can be left alone as they happily continue to develop tubers under the ground. Peonies live contentedly in the same spot for a hundred years. However, when the flower numbers fall off or you want to make more plants, don’t be afraid to dig and divide—contrary to that old myth that you should never move a peony.

The only truth to peony plant wisdom passed down through the ages is that if you plant a peony in the same place as another one, it will not grow. Peonies are known to emit a substance that affects the site. If you plan on planting a peony in the same site, you will need to replace the soil in order for a successful transplant. First year peonies after this evening’s divisions will only realistically produce one stem, so patience is the key for established plants to produce flowers. The divided plant needs the time to grow new roots before pushing forth blooms. Peony Guru Don Hollingsworth’s advice (www.hollingsworthpeonies.com) is to dig/divide at year three for good flowers. After digging up the plant, Don cut off some of the lesser roots and the tops. There’s no need for a hardening off process, but waiting a day wouldn’t hurt. Each cutting should show 3 to 5 “eyes” for a successful division. Small eyes on a peony indicate a late bloomer. Don demonstrated one or two pie-wedge cuttings with a clean, sharp knife and mentioned that he likes to scrape out some of the natural rotting black “junk” that may appear while cleaning it up. After this demo, Don asked for two volunteers to separate the rest of the large peony. Faith and Mary V. were quick to assist and wielded the knife in a bold fashion. We then reconvened in Lisa’s living room for all things peony and a slide show of some top performers in many varieties.

Peony Overview: Don explained that fully mature peonies are the pride of every gardener even if they flower for only a few days. Peonies rank up there with magnolias as the most primitive (oldest) flowering plants in the world. They can be branded as an all-season perennial, first emerging with their reddish fronds that burst into wide, lobed green leaves, followed by the beautiful flowers, gorgeous seed pods and finally, the fall leaf color. They are among the most expensive cut flowers and are also used in homeopathic remedies.

Planting: In the landscape, peonies look grand as a border hedge (as in English gardens); acting as a support for taller plants like lilies or delphiniums in the back of the border; or combined with other early bloomers as a way to hide dying bulb foliage. Peonies prefer full sun, but tolerate some shade. Unusually hot spring weather will affect their bloom time, however. They also like fertile, humus-rich, moist, well-drained soil with lots of compost. Avoid planting them under trees, where they must compete for nutrients. Some varieties may require support for their blooms (cages) and it’s best to shelter them from strong winds. There’s no need to mulch. Too much fertilizer, particularly nitrogen causes floppy growth and retards blooming. Planting our new divided tubers this fall requires the right site (preferably full sun), careful preparation and correct placement—buds or eyes should be 1/2” to 1” below the soil surface and about 2 to 3 ft.

apart. The eyes should not be showing, as the tubers and crown will gradually creep up. Basic advice is to not plant too deep or too high. The eyes should be just below the surface and you should be able to feel the pips with your palm when they're dormant. If planted too deep or too high, they won't produce flowers. Don recommended digging a "\$100 hole for a \$20 peony"...making it a big fertile hole for room to grow. He likes mushroom compost as an additive to mix with sandy soil. The end result should be crumbly and full of worms with this compost. Don didn't recommend animal manure compost and did not recommend trying to grow peonies in hardpan. Basically, if you need to add fertilizer, you have the plants in the wrong place. A small amount of a timed release fertilizer would be all right, since there are two different kinds of nitrogen at different times. It will not make that much of a difference.

Water: Water in the very beginning at transplant time after mixing the soil to compact the site, but our rains are enough...even maybe too much at some point, since these plants are drought tolerant. **Pests/Diseases:** Don't be alarmed when you see ants on the flower buds. Ants have a friendly symbiotic relationship with peonies, since they're after the sweet sticky nectar that allows the buds to emerge from their green casing. Also, slugs in early spring can damage the emerging leaves. Diseases that can affect peonies include botrytis (which is endemic to peonies here in the northwest), stem rot, and verticillium wilt. If blooms are affected by botrytis, cut them off. Spraying some fungicides all around and underneath the stems can also help fight this fungal disease, but correcting the too damp conditions is foremost in prevention.

Varieties: Most peonies which have their origins in Europe, northeastern Asia, and the Caucasus regions, are of the herbaceous species and hybrids. Tree peonies, which are really woody shrubs are their garden cousins, and they have a tendency to get leggy and should be planted deeper. Don mentioned that singles grow ok in less sun, and are the most desirable in the NW, but people do not pay much attention to them, instead clamoring for the more blowsy semi-doubles and doubles. And more recently, the Intersectionals or Itoh peonies have become the pricey darlings of the peony world. These were first hybridized in Japan by Itoh as a cross with herbaceous (bush) and tree peonies. Don said he ordered four typically yellow plants early in the production, which were very weak and subsequently have not been sold any more. Now there are new colors (purples) and some Norway's hybrids go for \$500 to \$600 apiece, but they are scentless. Bartzella is considered the best intersectional and gets tall (6-7 ft). Throughout the peony lecture, Don displayed luscious blooms on the screen, including: Laura (ivory), Dezaire (picotee), Lemon chiffon (herbaceous), Little Dorritt, Godishi (tree), Gay Paris, Clare-de-Lune and many other beautiful varieties.

We all appreciated Don's uber-knowledge of these rewarding, work-horses of the perennial garden. Don left us with dreams of fragrant, luscious blooms for next spring; but we also learned that despite their exotic appearance, peonies are tough and hardy perennials (especially to survive the knife wielding divisions we witnessed) that promise years and years of blooming pleasure.