

An Intersectional Point of View

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Fall Foliage Colors and Other Fall Characteristics of the Intersectional Hybrid Group

As I write this article, it is early October and the fall foliage season in northern Massachusetts and southern New Hampshire is just beginning. September was warm and very dry and as a result the foliage season seems to be later and less spectacular than usual. As I survey my garden there seem to be many fewer plants showing good fall foliage colors than in previous years. Colorful fall foliage is an important characteristic of the intersectional hybrid group that is rarely noted or discussed in the literature. Therefore, I would like to take this opportunity to summarize my observations of the fall foliage of my many intersectional hybrids as recorded over the last several years.

To begin, there is substantial plant-to-plant variation among my collection of intersectional hybrids with regards to fall foliage color. In this context, fall color refers to various shades and blends of yellow, brown, orange, purple and red. The intersectional hybrids fall primarily in the orange to red color range. The orangey shades are mostly bronzy orange. The reds are usually deep purplish or brownish reds and are quite pretty. The colors are not real intense, but are usually more on the muted side. Many of these hybrids undergo little or no color change and simply turn brown and die back after the first hard frost. Some, however, slowly change color over a period of weeks and display their pretty autumn colors for several weeks prior to dieback. The fall of 2004 was a spectacular season for foliage in New England and the intersectional hybrids were no exception. During this period, I examined the plants in my garden and tried to assign each plant a “fall foliage rating” from none to excellent based on a combination of both color and intensity. The results of that exercise are summarized in the table below. As can be seen from the table, more than half (58%) of the plants in 2004 had foliage with good to excellent fall colors.

Table 1. Summary of foliage color ratings of intersectional hybrids observed during the fall of 2004.

Overall Fall Foliage Color Rating	Percent of Total (%)
Excellent	5
Very Good	18
Good	35
Some	41
None	1

As is common with most trees and shrubs in New England, there is also substantial year-to-year variation of the fall colors displayed by the intersectional hybrids. Some years are far more colorful than others. For example, so far this year, only about 10-15% of my plants have good to excellent fall foliage colors, although this number could increase some when the nights finally get colder later in the month. In this regard, it is interesting to note that the most colorful varieties one year may not be especially noteworthy the next year and vice versa. This year the variety with the best fall foliage is IMPOSSIBLE DREAM, my reverse hybrid from the cross (suffruticosa x lactiflora). The foliage color is a deep, dark oxblood red, like a good pair of oxblood leather shoes. Last year this plant was not listed among the most colorful varieties, but was instead listed with the large group of plants with the minimal foliage color rating of “some”. On the other hand, some varieties that were outstanding last year are listed among the not so colorful group this year. Some examples of named varieties in this group are SMITH FAMILY YELLOW, STRAWBERRY BLONDE, BUILD ME UP BUTTERCUP, WHITE KNIGHT AND HALEIGH’S COMET, all of which were outstanding in 2004. Still, each year there seem to be a considerable number of plants with beautiful foliage colors that really stand out in the autumn garden. This is a highly desirable characteristic in peonies and clearly adds to the already significant landscape value of the intersectional peony group.

Another little known characteristic of the intersectional group that merits more attention is the very large seed pods which develop in summer and cover the plants throughout late summer and fall. As some are no doubt aware, many of the intersectional hybrids have huge seed pods, which seldom if ever contain seeds, but are oftentimes very attractive and distinctive in the autumn landscape. On many plants these pods measure up to 2 ½ inches in length and an inch or more across. They are often quite colorful and come in a range of colors from green to purple and green to pure, deep purple-red. A few examples of these attractive seed pods can be seen on my website at www.intersectionalpeonies.com by going to the extra pages link and then clicking on the “Fall Seed Pods” page in the menu bar. There you will also find a “Fall Foliage” page with numerous examples of fall foliage colors. To me, these characteristics are just an extra little autumn bonus that enhances the joy of growing these interesting new peonies.