I remember being at school and talking with the careers advisor about my plans to study horticulture and being told that it was not the best course for me and that I wouldn't earn a sensible living working in horticulture.

Left: Image caption here Borem fugit et, adi dolenet, sequi cum quasi con num venissim veliquae. Toreptatur, nullibusa, adi dolenet, sequi cum quasi con num venissim veliquae. Toreptatur, nullibusa.

I worked weekends and holidays at the garden centre and nursery until I was about nineteen, travelling home at weekends whilst studying at university.

From an early age I learnt that horticulture is pretty demanding and whilst my friends were meeting up and hanging around town at the weekends, I was at the nursery, watering and weeding. Horticulture is not for the faint-hearted and you have to be pretty determined. Its cold in the winter and hot in the summer in the greenhouses and regardless of your social calendar, the plants need care and attention. But I loved it and it kept me out of trouble.

A carreer in horticulture

At the age of sixteen I was obliged to take careers advice and decide on which A-level courses to study. I was pretty clear that I wanted to study horticulture at Kew and follow in the footsteps of my mentors at the garden centre and nursery. I remember being at school and talking with the careers advisor about my plans to study horticulture and being told that it was not the best course for me and that I wouldn't earn a sensible living working in horticulture. I didn't really understand the argument because as far as I could tell, the owners of the garden centre and nursery I worked at seemed to be making a reasonable living out of horticulture. In any event, I was persuaded to study more academic subjects with a view to becoming a lawyer. I enjoyed a good argument so this kind of made sense. The pathway to a career in horticulture for me was therefore circuitous. I studied law at university, got a master's degree in corporate law and was admitted to the bar. My career as a lawyer was however, short and sweet. I very much enjoyed prosecuting in the Magistrates' court and really enjoyed the sense of family that exists, making some really good friends along the way but the fact is that it really wasn't what I wanted to do and so, when the opportunity arose to follow my dreams, I did and in 2006 we purchased a nursery in beautiful, rural Bedfordshire. The nursery is about 8 acres and is on a sloping site with good soil, surrounded by agricultural land and incredible views of the landscape.

Itoh peonies are named after Toichi Itoh, a Japanese breeder who in the late 1940s succeeded in hybridizing an herbaceous peony with a woody peony to get a plant with the best characteristics of herbaceous and woody peonies. Sadly Toichi Itoh died before he ever saw his new hybrids flower. However since the first hybrids appeared in the mid 1970s breeders have been working hard to introduce new cultivars and steadily the range of intersectional peonies has increased.

Intersectional peonies are compact (but often substantial) plants (usually around 2'6"-3' high) that die down completely in the winter before emerging again in the spring, so far this sounds very similar to an herbaceous peony but an intersectional hybrid has masses of much larger flowers and, because of its woody peony heritage, it generally does not require any staking to support the weight of the sometimes very large flowers. Generally speaking, Itoh peonies flower for longer than both herbaceous and woody peonies, sometimes for 4-5 weeks in early to mid season and when mature, can easily have 40 or 50 blooms on each plant. Intersectional peonies also have stunning finely-cut foliage that looks great throughout the summer with a red tinge in spring and a kaleidoscope of colour in early autumn.

Peonies are well-known for their big, blousy, sumptuous flowers and the Itoh peonies take this a step further with an incredible range of colours, shapes and colour combinations of flowers. Just look at *Paeonia 'Lollipop'* for example, it has unbelievable flowers that are bright yellow with purple flecks that make this a really striking peony. For something to really catch the eye, *Paeonia 'Morning Lilac'* stands out with its bright purple flowers with golden stamens. If its pastels you need, how about *Paeonia 'Pastel Splendor'* which has gorgeous semi-double flowers that are lavender and pale pink with a deeper burgundy flare from the centre, the seed head on this cultivar is also very striking and worthy of note. *Paeonia 'Court Jester'* has a different flower shape entirely; it is a single flower and the petals are shaped like a jester's hat, the flowers are golden yellow with strong burgundy basal flares and orange stamens in the centre.

Top left: Paeonia Court Jester
Borem fugit et, adi dolenet, sequi cum quasi con num venissim veliquae. Toreptatur, nullibusa, adi dolenet, sequi cum quasi con num venissim veliquae. Toreptatur, nullibusa.

Top right: Image caption here Borem fugit et, adi dolenet, sequi cum quasi con num venissim veliquae. Toreptatur, nullibusa, adi dolenet, sequi cum quasi con num venissim veliquae. Toreptatur, nullibusa.

Below left: Paeonia Julia Rose
Borem fugit et, adi dolenet, sequi cum quasi con num venissim veliquae. Toreptatur, nullibusa, adi dolenet, sequi cum quasi con num venissim veliquae. Toreptatur, nullibusa.

Below right: Paeonia Lollipop
Borem fugit et, adi dolenet, sequi cum quasi con num venissim veliquae. Toreptatur, nullibusa, adi dolenet, sequi cum quasi con num venissim veliquae. Toreptatur, nullibusa.

Peonies in Full Sun or Part Shade

For more exposed positions in the garden there are more compact peonies that will tolerate this; indeed, intersectional peonies tend to be a good choice because of their woody peony framework.

Most peonies will prefer full sun positions in the garden in order to maximise flower production. There are some that are quite happy in partial shade (although not heavy shade) and I find that these peonies hold their fragrance better (generally because it is not evaporated so quickly by the heat of the day) and are often very delicate and beautiful. Woody peonies will often tolerate partial shade, provided that they get four or more hours of sunlight each day.

Peonies as Border Plants

Peonies can grow to become substantial woody shrubs, 1.2-1.5m tall and even some of the herbaceous peonies can reach over 1m, making them ideal plants when placed towards the back of a border. The vast majority of peonies grow to around 90cm, but there are some shorter cultivars that are perfect in the middle of the border, such as Paeonia lactiflora 'Gay Paree' AGM and some that are better suited to the front of the border, such as Paeonia officinalis 'Anemoniflora Rosea'.

Intersectional peonies are excellent for the centre or back of borders, growing to around 90cm tall and with a solid, compact habit, which can be very dominant in a smaller or narrow border but perfect in a traditional herbaceous border.

Peonies as Landscape Plants

For mass planting, the reliable Paeonia lactiflora 'Krinkled White', which often does not need staking, makes a good temporary hedge, with lots of single white flowers with crinkled petals on mid-green foliage. However, many peonies if grown a little more closely together, will provide each other with support, negating the need for plant supports entirely.

Page 68-69: caption Unt minvendis et vero ipsunde volorenimus et liquis et, con nos aut et, sa dolut re neceatem ipsam, quo omnim aut quis aspienditaes nestrumquia.

Above: *Paeonia officinalis 'Anemoniflora Rosea'*. Herbaceous old-fashioned peony with finely cut green foliage and medium-sized cerise pink double flowers.

Peonies as Specimens and Statement Plants

Equally, peonies work very well as centrepieces or statements in the garden and can easily provide a focal point in the summer.

on the gardening triumphs of the summer. For me, the highlight of the summer is unquestionably during the relatively short flowering window (late April to June), when peonies are in full, majestic flower, but as the summer comes to an end, the foliage of peonies, and especially intersectional peonies, unfailingly brings unexpected pleasure and interest.

Herbaceous peonies that die down completely in the winter have the strongest autumnal colour, with the intersectional varieties (such as Paeonia 'Morning Lilac') providing a strong, dignified show of orange, red, green and purple foliage whilst the remainder of the garden is in decline. Some of the earlier flowering varieties (such as Paeonia off. 'Rubra Plena' AGM or Paeonia 'Coral Charm' AGM) may start to change colour and die off whilst the remainder of the garden is in full summer swing in early August. Woody peonies (for example, Paeonia x lemoinei 'High Noon' AGM) can be equally impressive before they too lose their large, divided leaves, leaving their woody stems nobly standing proud in the flower beds. Even as the peony dies down for the winter, it does so gracefully and with panache, reminding us of its status as a pre-eminent garden plant and of its flowering glory earlier in the summer.

Perfect Plants for the Garden

As a result of their longevity, peonies can be considered inheritance plants that can be passed from one generation to anothe

One of the interesting things I have learnt about peonies is that they are pretty hardy garden plants, which means they are perfect for gardeners of all abilities.

Peonies are long-lived plants (I have been told by people that they have peony plants in the gardens that are over 100 years old) and usually require little maintenance or care. They are pretty drought tolerant in the summer and don't mind the harshest English winters. And of course, they have the most stunning selection of flower blooms. As peony plants mature and settle in to their long life they will often produce more and more blooms each year. As a result of their longevity, peonies can be considered inheritance plants that can be passed from one generation to another, hopefully inspiring the next generation of gardeners along the way and carrying with them memories and cherished thoughts. Peonies may be a little more expensive to purchase than some other more short-lived perennial plants but when looked at over their long life, are actually very cost-effective plants providing exceptional value for money. Undemanding, reliable, long-lived and easy to grow, peonies are perhaps the perfect plant for the garden.

Selecting peonies

Choosing the perfect peony for your garden is however more complicated given the wide range of cultivars and species available and there is a real risk that you can become addicted to collecting peonies. Which isn't a bad thing; but unless you have a very large garden you will have to choose carefully. In my very small courtyard garden at home, we have a lot of peonies and a lot of roses; they make a simple yet fine pairing because the roses will flower for most of the Summer. Winter colour in my garden depends on my flowering cherry tree and some evergreen hedging that the birds adore for shelter.

Left: Paeonia Court Jester. Court Jester has distinctive open flowers, single golden yellow turning orange with strong burgundy basal flares and golden stamens.