

THE PUREST RED COLORS

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From the Facebook 'Planet Peony' group by Bob Johnson, May 24, 2017. As it's hidden in the 'stream' of activities in that group, it's unlikely that you'd easily find it, which is a pity as it's an informative article, thus here's a 'reprint' (with some added pictures):

Helen Matthews vs. Alexander Woollcott vs. Carina - The purest Red colors in Peonies.

I took a second "binge hybridizing" trip to [Adelmans](#) (A's) a few days ago, in order to work on some of the seedlings I have there, and as part of my trip, had the chance to put together a big vase of flowers, which I feel possess the best true "flag red" colors in peonies. They were all in bloom at the A's at the same time, so I grabbed some and brought them home.

Carina (two flowers at bottom), Alexander Woollcott (top right) and Helen Matthews (two flowers top left)

As far as Alexander Woollcott vs Helen Matthews goes, Helen Matthews has a much more attractive plant than Alexander Woollcott. The foliage on Alexander Woollcott is thin and crinkled and fairly sparse, whereas the foliage on Helen Matthews is much nicer and more luxurious. Carina has nice foliage as well, and is almost indistinguishable from the color of Alexander Woollcott.

Alexander Woollcott

Helen Matthews has several rows of petals, while Alexander Woollcott and Carina are more resolutely single.

Helen Matthews is a bit darker as far as the red color goes, but not so much to make a large difference. Both Alexander Woollcott and Carina open up widely as they age, while Helen Matthews retains a better form I believe, and all of them bloom at about the same time. Early-mid season, as far as the hybrids go. All of these are of a more pure red color than Dad, or Red Red Rose, varieties that were once felt to be the best reds, but which still contain small traces of magenta.

Red Red Rose

Red Red Rose

Compared to The Mackinac Grand, they are lighter and more brilliant. Having said that, The Mackinac Grand also qualifies as a pure red in my book. It's considerably darker and a bit later to bloom, and doesn't really fall into the "flag red" category. But useful as a pure red and fertile as well.

The Mackinac Grand

The Mackinac Grand

Aside from Mackinac Grand, none of these are tetraploids, so pulling out their red color for breeding will involve pollinating a large number of flowers, in the hopes of getting a seed or two. At this point I have one small seedling which has just germinated this spring - (Helen Matthews x The Mackinac Grand) which I hope to live long enough to use in my breeding at some point. This is a cross that I hope to make again this year.

My sense is what distinguishes these varieties is not so much the fact that they are red, but more that they have managed somehow to avoid inheriting the magenta color that comes down from the lactiflora reds.

Helen Matthews and Alexander Woollcott are still fairly hard to locate, for reasons I've never been sure of. They both seem to be doing quite well at the A's and should be available from them at some point in the future.

Worth growing if only to see exactly how good red can be among peonies. I was not able to compare them directly with The Little Corporal or Laddie, a couple of other hybrids which are more single (and are fertile tets) and which also qualify as pure reds in my opinion.

Bob Johnson

The Little Corporal