

Peonies



There are 4 major species of Peonies: Tree Peonies, Herbaceous Peonies, Intersectional Peonies and Woodland Intersectional Peonies.

1. Herbaceous Peony: Most common, appear early spring and die back to the ground every winter
2. Tree Peony: Woody shrub, can grow to 5' tall with blooms in richly colored hues and sometimes flares on petals, natural habitat is along woodland areas that provide protection from winter winds and light shade during hot summer days
3. Intersectional (Itoh) Peony: A cross between Herbaceous Peonies and Tree Peonies, blooms more like a Tree Peony and die back every winter

Planting Guide

Peonies can be planted at any time of the year, but the best time to plant is in the fall, anytime from late August to until the ground is frozen. Peonies can be planted from bare root stock or from a container. Before planting bare root Peonies, soak the roots in water if they have been allowed to dry out. Heavy clay loam is the ideal soil with plenty of organic material incorporated. Peonies like heavy soil, but not wet feet, so drainage is the most critical point. Peonies are happy with soil pH levels between 6.8-7.2. Peonies can live to be over 50 years old, so preparation is essential. Plant in part to full sun with good air circulation – about 3-4' between each Peony. Prepare the soil by digging a hole about 12-18" deep and wide enough to accommodate root system. Mound the soil in the center, tapping it to get air pockets out and then place the roots on the mound with the eyes pointing up. The eyes should not be deeper than 2" below the soil surface. Firm the soil and water thoroughly. Peonies need a prolonged winter chill to break dormancy for them to grow well. Peonies are hardy to -50°F making them one of the best perennials for cold climates. Mulch the newly planted Peony only during the first year to prevent heaving. Remove the mulch from around the crown of the plant in the spring to prevent fungal problems.

Fertilizer

Peonies typically need little fertilization, but in some instances, it is good to give them a little boost. First consider the soil conditions. Sandy soil will require more fertilization (once a year) as the nutrients easily leach out of the soil. Clay soil will hold the nutrients, so it will not require as much fertilization. Should you decide to apply fertilizer, it would be applied when the spring foliage is around 6". Be conservative with the fertilizer, Peonies store energy in their roots and over fertilization will weaken the plant and reduce flowering. Use a fertilizer low in nitrogen. Both organic (fish emulsions) and chemical fertilizers (slow release) work well. Applying fertilizer while the plant is beginning to bloom will cause the blooms to bolt when cut and placed in a vase.

Disease

Prevention is the key to keep Peonies healthy. Fall clean up and good air circulation are the key components to healthy Peonies. Powdery Mildew and Botrytis are the most common disease problems.

Powdery Mildew can infect the plants when there are hot days, high humidity and cool nights. Powdery Mildew will not kill your Peony, but once the plant is infected that year, there are virtually no sprays that will rid the plant of it for the remainder of the season. Use preventative spraying (Copper Fungicide, horticultural oils) before Powdery Mildew appears on the summer foliage and surrounding soil. This works well if you know Powdery Mildew is an issue in your garden every year or if the weather conditions are prime for this disease.

Botrytis is most commonly seen during wet seasons when temperatures remain below 70°F. Botrytis will kill Herbaceous Peonies if not treated. The shoots will rot off at the base and a gray mold will develop. Removal of infected stems and leaves is important in controlling Botrytis. In the fall, after the foliage has turned brown, cut it back to the ground and discard it. A root drench is also recommended. Good housekeeping is the best prevention of carryover of disease.

Fall Clean Up

In the fall, Herbaceous Peony leaves begin to die back for the winter. As they fade, they are no longer photosynthesizing and providing sugar to the root, which means that it is time for fall clean up. Cut back your Herbaceous Peony stems so they are 3-4" above the ground and throw away the leaves. Do not compost the leaves to keep from passing on any diseases. If desired add a root drench, bone meal or a slow release fertilizer. Compost may be placed around the root zone but not directly on the crown.

Deadheading

After you have enjoyed the beauty of the Peony blooming season, it's time to deadhead the spent blooms. If they are not removed, the plant will put its energy into producing seeds instead of root growth.

Bloom Sequence

Peonies bloom over a seven-week period that typically begins in early June. The best way to get a longer season or range of blooms is by planting different Peonies with different bloom times. First to bloom is the Woodland Intersectional Peonies followed by Tree Peonies, Intersectional Peonies and finally Herbaceous Peonies. Single Herbaceous Peonies bloom first followed by semi-doubles, double reds, double pinks, Japanese forms and finally double whites. Once there is approximately 6" of growth you can expect blooms within 45 to 60 days.

Cut Flower Storage

Cut Peony blooms can be extended using cold, dry storage. When the first crack of color appears on the hard green bud, cut the stem (to about 16" long), strip off most of the leaves and wrap as many as ten stems in three layers of tissue paper. Put them in your refrigerator for up to three weeks. When you take them out they will look sleepy and droopy. Cut an inch off the stem and stand them in fresh water to rehydrate. Within two days the stems will be in full blooms.