



Gardeners Helping Gardeners Succeed

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All About Peonies

Explore the world of Peony varieties

You will discover that classic herbaceous peonies (*Paeonia lactiflora*), also known as Chinese peonies, are just the tip of the iceberg. Several other types of peonies exist, including tree peonies (*Paeonia suffruticosa*) and intersectional peonies, which are also known as Itoh hybrids.

Different types of peonies bring various attributes to the garden scene. **Herbaceous peonies** are the more traditional garden peony well-recognized and beloved for its blousy blooms and beautiful fragrance. Typically flowering during the transition period from spring into summer the herbaceous varieties are virtually carefree and can live for generations. Dark green leaves have a sheen and remain vibrant until hard frosts. Once hard frosts zap herbaceous peony leaves, plants go dormant and disappear from the landscape until the following spring, when new growth emerges from the root tuber. Common heirloom peonies include several herbaceous peony varieties that date back as far as the 1800s. (If you see ants on your peony, let them be. Ants keep predators away while feeding off of the sticky nectar on new buds.)

The **tree peony** is a shrub, having woody stems that lose their leaves when frosty weather arrives. In spring, new growth emerges from buds on the woody stems. These types of peonies typically flower before herbaceous peony varieties. The shrub-like growth habit results in tree peonies having giant, dinner plate-size flowers that can measure 6 to 9 inches across. The blossoms are breathtaking and long-lasting in the garden. Tree peonies grow very slowly, reaching heights of 3 to 7 feet, depending on the variety. Most plants achieve a height between 3 and 5 feet.

Itoh peonies (intersectional) were originally produced from a cross made by a Japanese plant breeder, Mr. Toichi Itoh. Gardeners treasure the Itoh types of peonies because blossoms open in hues that are not commonplace among peonies, including yellow, peach, and coral shades. Itoh peonies are usually in more short supply and cost more than other types of peonies. Leaves and stems on Itoh hybrids die to the ground in winter, much like herbaceous peony varieties.

As you select different types of peonies for your garden, focus on choosing a mix of peony varieties that flower at different times. By planting a mix that flowers in each time slot, you can enjoy a long peony season.

Dividing and Planting Peonies

The best time to divide and plant a peony is September. Here are a few tips for successful peony division and planting.

Division

- Cut plant stems down to ground level.
- Carefully dig plants and shake gently to remove soil.
- Cut clump into sections making sure that each section has 3-5 eyes and a portion of the root system.

Planting

- Dig a hole at least 18 inches deep and 18 inches wide.
- Break up any large clods of soil and add organic matter, if needed.
- Add a fertilizer low in nitrogen and high in phosphorus to half the soil and place this soil into the bottom of the hole.
- Add soil without fertilizer to adjust the soil height so the peony division may be properly placed
- **Plant the peony so that the eyes are approximately 2 inches below the soil surface in the northern U.S.**
- Water thoroughly throughout the fall and mulch with 3 inches of straw in late fall. Remove mulch when growth resumes in the spring.

Where to Plant Peonies

Select a sunny, well-drained location for your peonies. They will tolerate some shade but should have at least a half-day of sunshine. The best blooms are usually found on plants growing in full sunlight. Do not plant near large trees or heavy shrubs where they would be robbed of necessary moisture and plant food. Plants may be spaced from two to four feet apart according to desired effect in the landscape. If you wish to develop large specimen clumps, space them four feet apart. Peonies prefer a soil that tests 6.5 pH.

Fertilizing

If your ground has been properly enriched at planting time, there will be little need for further fertilization for some years. The type of soil will determine the frequency. Porous soils lose their fertility faster than others, as it is washed out by the rains. Keep all fertilizer away from the crowns of the plants, there are no feeding roots there. Spread it over the area where the roots grow, from six to eighteen inches from the crown and thoroughly incorporate it with the soil. Use it with discretion. Over-fertilized plants will not bloom well and soon run their course. About a handful of commercial fertilizer or one or more of bone-meal to a plant will be plenty.

Watering

Water your peony plants immediately after planting so that the soil settles well around the roots. During the spring months, there is usually enough moisture in the ground for peony plants, but if several weeks pass without rain, give them a good watering once every two weeks. This should also be done during the dry summer months after the peonies have bloomed to ensure a good crop of flowers the following year.

Winter Protection

Newly planted peonies should be given winter protection for the first winter after planting. After the ground has frozen, in fall, give them a covering of straw or marsh hay about three inches deep. This covering will protect the plants against heaving due to alternate thawing and freezing. Remove the covering very early in spring. Established plants need no winter protection. When foliage has turned brown in fall, after the first heavy frost, cut the plants down as near to the ground as possible. Burn all the old stems and leaves as a protection against disease.

What to expect from your Peonies

The first spring after planting, a standard division will make one or more stems six or more inches high. Do not be discouraged if growth is low and only one stem appears. It may bloom and it may not. Do not worry if it does not. Many growers do not allow a plant to bloom the first year. If you allow the plant to bloom, cut the flower as soon as it fades directly below the bloom. Do not allow seed to form. First year peony blooms rarely give a true picture of the variety.

The second year, the number of stems is usually double the number that came the first year. Growth is taller. If there are blooms, they are nearer normal. Cut all blooms immediately after flowering, with short stems. Some varieties take several years to produce normal flowers.

The third year growth generally doubles that of the second year. Blooms should be normal in every way. Do not cut the stems too long. While the finest flowers are produced from plants 4-10 years old, many varieties have been known to give exhibition blooms for 20 or more years. Plants that have been well cared for will even outlive the gardener. If they are forced into abnormal growth by the use of stimulants, they will give out in a few years.

Why Do Peonies Fail to Bloom?

There are many reasons, but here are the most common:

- Plants are too young and immature. Let them develop.
- Plants are planted too deep. If eyes are more than 3 inches underground, raise to proper height of 2 inches.
- Large clumps planted without proper division. Dig, divide into small or standard divisions, and plant.
- Plants have too much competition from surrounding trees and shrubs.
- Plants have too much shade which encourages tall leafy plants and no blooms. Move.
- Too much nitrogen was applied which encourages foliage not flowers. Phosphorous or potassium will strengthen roots.
- Plants are undernourished. Buds show, but do not develop. Fertilize to add strength.
- Buds killed by late frost.
- Excessively hot weather. Late, full double varieties often fail from this cause.
- Buds attacked by thrips will turn brown and fall. Spray to prevent this.
- Buds that become water-logged will turn brown and refuse to open. Bagging would help.
- Ground is too dry. Water down to the bottom of roots.
- Roots infected with nematodes or root-knot. Destroy.



Left: New shoots in Spring

Right: Itoh Peony



Left: Tree Peony

Above: One of many varieties of herbaceous Peony



Itoh Peony Julia Rose