

## **Paeonia** (Peony)



Peonies fall into three principal classes:

- Herbaceous - hardy perennials well suited to Climate Zones 8 and 9 - winter chill requirements same as deciduous fruits
- Tree - deciduous woody shrubs - less dependent on winter chill
- Intersectional (Itoh) - growth habit of herbaceous peonies, blooms resemble those of tree peonies

Since there are fewer tree peonies grown in this area, this handout will deal mostly with herbaceous peonies.

### **Uses of Herbaceous Peonies**

- Companion plants - attractive foliage compliments many other perennials
- Grouped together in beds surrounded by lawn
- In bays of big shrub borders

**Blooms** - not all fragrant, but some have fragrance of old-fashioned roses

- Bloom size range - 5-12 inches
- Bloom season - mid- to late-spring
- Bloom forms - single, Japanese, anemone, semi-double, crown, bomb, semi-rose and rose
- Color range - pure white through creams and pinks to reds- newer cultivars include deeper reds, chocolate tones, even pure yellow

**Site Selection** - choose carefully; peonies are long-lived and don't like to be moved

- Sunny location - will do well in light shade but best blooms usually on those in full sun
- Good drainage
- Reasonably good soil
- Away from large trees or heavy shrubs

**Cultivar Selection** - many colors and bloom forms available

- Many named cultivars available
- Some nurseries sell unnamed seedlings (select while in bloom to ensure getting desired bloom form and color)
- Bare-root grafted plants offered in winter and very early spring

**Soil Preparation** - important factor in growing peonies

- Prepare well before planting
- Dig or till in a 2- to 4-inch layer of organic matter
- If planting in area of sandy soil, replace that removed from planting hole with good garden soil

**Planting** - Ideal time is early fall. Once planted, peonies can be left to grow undisturbed indefinitely. (There are records of peonies living more than 100 years). They may take 3-4 years to reach mature size; may not bloom first year and only a little the second.

- Pink growth buds (eyes) at ground level or barely covered in Zones 7 and above
- Planting hole - twice as wide as actual root size (deeper holes are generally not needed unless the soil is compacted so air and water can't move through it)
- Mix double handful of bone meal with soil for each plant

If you have mail-ordered peonies and find you are unable to plant upon their arrival, keep packaging material damp (not wet) and store in cool location - refrigerator vegetable bin is ideal

**Fertilization** - Peonies respond to regular applications of 5-10-5

- Keep all fertilizer away from plant crowns - spread it where the feeding roots are - 6-18 inches from the crown - and incorporate it into the soil
- Avoid over-fertilizing, especially while getting established. Over-fertilizing is more problematic than under-fertilizing
- If using manure, use only well rotted and take great care to keep it away from crowns (some say it should never be used)
- Half handful of commercial fertilizer or one or more of bone meal around plants which will not be dug, divided or transplanted - apply twice during growing season
- Fertilizer good for potatoes is also good for peonies - apply in fall

**Irrigation** - Peonies prefer regular light irrigation - don't tolerate standing water

- In spring only if no rain for several weeks - then every two weeks
- Also during dry summer months after bloom - for good crop of bloom next year

**Support** - There are several means of providing support for the heavy blooms. Any type of support should be placed close to the ground very early in the growing season and raised as plants mature.

- Metal rings on legs 15-18 inches above the ground - rings hold center stems upright, allow outer stems to bend naturally, keeping blooms off ground
- Circle of large-mesh grill cut and attached to bamboo stake on each side of clump
- For row of peonies - place stakes at ends and in middle of row; run soft twine between stakes at 2 or 3 heights
- Tomato cages - cut just above lower ring, leaving a single ring with legs (use for other plants), spread the new legs enough to allow placement around the crown
- For row of peonies - place stakes at ends and in middle of row; run soft twine between stakes at 2 or 3 heights

**Wind Protection** - evergreen hedge may help prevent wind damage

**Disbudding** - larger flowers; shorter bloom season

- Remove all but terminal bud on each stem
- Remove all but 4 or 5 shoots, when they reach 4-6 inches, by snipping near the ground
- If longer bloom but a smaller flower is preferred, do not disbud; snip out central flower as soon as it fades; side buds will continue to develop

## Uses

- Cut Flowers - Peonies make excellent cut flowers - can last up to a week or longer. Cut in early morning or late evening when outer petals begin to unfold; give normal care for cut flowers
- Potpourri

**Pests** - It may seem peonies could be subject to many problems. In fact, they rarely occur in well-kept plants and, when they do, are seldom serious

- **Ants** - only a problem if present in large numbers - may carry virus diseases from plant to plant - they are feeding on nectar exuded on outsides of buds
- **Snails** - on undersides of leaves and on soil in centers of clumps - may produce no evidence of damage or may produce signs of chewing as new growth emerges. Apply bait as growth begins or just before. Some people spread oyster shells (chicken scratch from feed store) around their plants; the shells cut the snails and they die
- **Insects** - flower thrips - spray or dust with insecticide
  - Make first application when buds reach size of large marble
  - Repeat weekly for good control

- **Disease** - Botrytis - soil-borne fungus - can be severe problem during long humid, sunless weather
  - May affect all plant parts
  - New shoots may suddenly turn black and die
  - Buds may turn brown and become a powdery dust
  - Leaves may develop brown spots - may spread and kill leaves
  - May spread downward on stem, causing it to die
  - Carried by insects and wind to other plants
  - Also carried over winter in plant debris left on ground
  - Damp weather and poor air circulation tend to make worse
- **To treat**
  - Cut away and dispose of all diseased growth
  - Avoid overwatering
  - Thin out plants to allow air and light penetration, or transplant to dry sunny location
  - Spray with fungicide such as Bordeaux mixture, following directions as given for sweet potatoes
  - Top-dressing of sand around crown often helps
- **Preventive measures** - effective control
  - After first heavy frost in fall, cut plant as near ground as possible
  - Clean up all stems and leaves and discard (not in compost pile)

**Transplanting** - only when absolutely necessary - as clumps outgrow allotted space; **divide** at same time

- Cut stems back to 6-8 inches
- Lift clumps carefully with fork, using stems as handles
- Hose dirt from roots
- Use heavy, sharp knife to divide into sections - each with at least 3 eyes and one undamaged root
- Dip in 10 percent bleach solution (9 parts water to 1 part bleach)
- Replant divisions immediately
  - If in same location, first exchange soil for new soil, removing about 1 ½ cubic feet of soil from planting area)
- Water well
- To aid in root development, remove flower buds the first year. Peonies divided in spring may take extra year or two to become established.

**Mulch** - to discourage weeds and conserve moisture

- 1 ½-2 inches of light, loose material (buckwheat hulls, ground corncobs, or peatmoss); or
- 1 inch of sawdust, leaf mold, compost, or grass clippings (these materials are heavier materials which may compact)
- Apply immediately after second fertilization

Use most of the mulch on ground between plants, tapering to very light covering or none close to stems - helps prevent crown rot during rainy weather.

**Tree Peonies** - deciduous shrubs 3-6 feet in height and width. The blooms, up to 12 inches in diameter, range from single to fully double.

### Types of Tree Peonies

- Japanese - single to double blooms held erect above foliage. Petals are silky and range from white through pink and red to lavender and purple.
- European - very double flowers which tend to droop. Colors are mostly pink and rose shades.
- Hybrids with P. lutea - single to double blooms in yellow, salmon, or sunset shades. Singles and semi-doubles hold up heads best.

**Climate** - very hardy to cold; less dependent on winter chill than herbaceous peonies

**Planting** - fall or very early spring if planting bare root; any time if planting from containers

- Plant away from competing tree roots
- Soil preparation same as for herbaceous peonies
- Plant deep - up to several inches deeper than in can or in growing field

**Pruning** - simple process

- Remove spent flowers
- Cut back to live wood in spring when buds begin to swell

**Intersectional (Itoh) Peonies** have growth habits of herbaceous peonies; blossoms resemble those of tree peonies. Culture is same as for herbaceous peonies

**Note:** A safe, but effective, post-emergence herbicide for use on grasses in peonies is Sethoxydim (Grass Getter or Poast) applied according to label directions

**Question:** Why are some of the tops of the roots hollowed out? This is a natural occurrence for peonies as the clumps age.

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**Listings in various gardening publications**

**Internet Listings**



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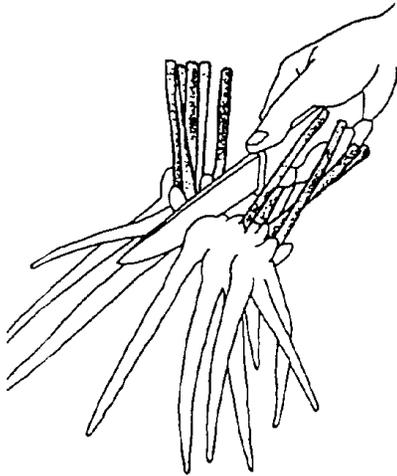
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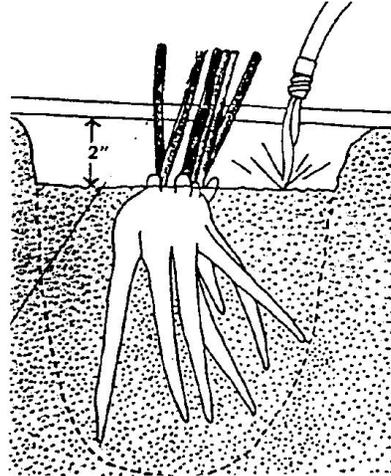
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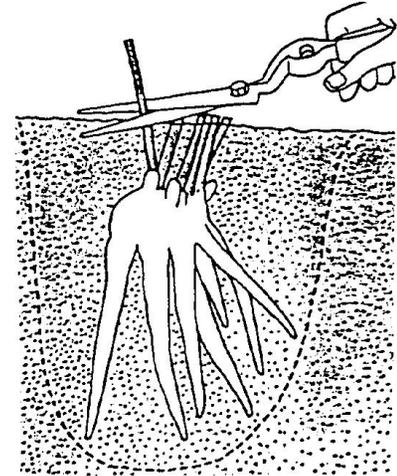
## Dividing and Planting Peonies



1. Cut clump, leaving at least three to five eyes and one unbroken root per section



2. Plant, having the eyes at soil level or barely covered; water well



3. Cut off any old stalks at soil level

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