



PEONIES

Peonies are a classic flower that just about everyone's grandmother grew, and with good reason: They are extremely long-lived, they have large showy, fragrant flowers that are good for cutting, and the glossy green foliage is attractive when the plants are finished blooming, turning a deep burgundy red in autumn. They are not especially fussy about soil, asking only for a mostly sunny position, and as an added bonus, they are unattractive to deer.

In our area, peonies begin blooming around Memorial Day, in various shades of pink, white, red and yellow, and flowers may be single, semi-double or double. Most grow to about three feet tall, and their rounded habit and coarse divided foliage makes them versatile for use in perennial, shrub or mixed borders. Tree peonies are less common than the shrub-like, herbaceous type. These are truly spectacular plants that grow up to five feet tall and make an impressive focal point in the garden. Once established, tree peonies produce an abundance of huge, beautiful flowers a week or two earlier than the herbaceous peonies do.



Tree peonies are royals of the peony family. Their huge blooms are gorgeous!

There are literally hundreds of peony varieties available today. Festiva Maxima is a classic beauty featuring striking double white flowers flecked with red. Raspberry Sundae is deliciously fragrant, and its many layers of pink, white and cream petals make it look good enough to eat. Scarlett O' Hara, like her namesake, is a gorgeous southern belle, bearing dramatic, single red blooms with many yellow stamens.

Kokoryunishiki is an absolutely stunning tree peony with reddish purple flowers brushed with contrasting pinkish flames. Or try Hanakiso, featuring very pretty soft apricot pink blooms with a pink edge.

Plant peonies in full sun to light shade—they will bloom better with more sun. They prefer a well-drained site and humus-rich soil: it is a good idea to work in some mushroom compost and some good topsoil into the hole at the time of planting. Bonemeal or superphosphate can also be added at this time if desired. Digging the hole 18 to 24 inches wide and as deep will ensure the best results. When planting herbaceous peonies, be sure that the eyes end up less than two inches below the soil level. Tree peonies are grafted and should be planted more deeply, with the graft union five to six inches below the soil surface. Water thoroughly, and mulch newly planted peonies to help retain moisture, keep down weeds, and prevent them from heaving out of the soil in winter.

Herbaceous peonies need support, especially those with huge, double flowers, which can weigh down the plant and end up lying in the mud after a heavy spring rain. Provide your plants with grow-through rings that feature sturdy grids, holding the stems up from below. Install these supports at planting time, or in the early spring for established plantings.

Maintenance tips:

- 1) Deadheading peonies will not extend bloom time, but it does help to keep them looking neater, especially the double-flowered varieties.
- 2) Provide your peonies with water during dry spells, but keep them out of range of automatic lawn sprinklers, as they do not like to be kept too wet.
- 3) Peonies do not require a lot of fertilizer and will tend to produce foliage at the expense of flowers if over-fertilized. If plants do need fertilizer, apply it in the fall, and choose a fertilizer that is not too high in nitrogen, such as bonemeal or superphosphate.
- 4) In the fall, cut back herbaceous peonies to the ground, as foliage left on the plant over the winter can harbor disease. Tree peonies should never be cut to the ground because they form a woody stem, but the foliage should still be collected and removed from the plant.
- 5) Peonies can live for many years without needing division, but when division is desired, this should be done around September. Before digging, cut back the foliage, leaving just enough stem so that you can handle the plant. Dig out the plant and cut apart sections, leaving three to five good eyes with each piece, and checking to see that there are healthy roots attached to the eyes. The most vigorous divisions will come from the outside of the plant. Tree peonies are not easy to divide and it is usually not necessary to do so.

When growing peonies, especially the tree types, it pays to have patience. They are slow to establish, but well worth the wait. Those who want a head start would do well to start with potted plants rather than bare-root specimens. And yes, it is true that peonies attract ants, but this does not harm the plants and does not mean that the ants will come streaming into your house. Just be sure to wash them off before making cut flower arrangements!