



PEONIES

Peonies are hardy perennials that need little care and will bloom every spring for many years. There are two types of peonies grown in the Inland Northwest. The first and most common type is the **garden**, or herbaceous, peony. It has full bushy stems that grow from thickened tuberous roots. Garden peonies grow 2-4 feet tall. They bloom in May and June with white, yellow, cream, pink, rose, or deep red blooms. The other type is a **tree** peony. They are hardy deciduous shrubs with blooms up to 1 foot across. Colors include yellow, pink, white, rose, crimson, scarlet, black, and purple. Tree peonies are less common than garden peonies but are rapidly gaining in popularity.

Site Selection

Garden peonies will do well in any good garden soil that is 12-18" deep and drains well. Garden peonies do best in full sun but will take some shade. If there is not sufficient sunshine, blossoms will be few and small. Garden varieties need protection from high winds but also need good air circulation to prevent disease. Tree peonies need nearly the same conditions. The only exception is that tree peonies need less sun -- a few hours in the morning and a few in late afternoon is ideal. Hot midday sun should be avoided.

Plant Selection

When buying garden peonies purchase tubers with three to five eyes (pink growth buds). Tubers with few or no eyes often rot in the ground. Tubers with more than five eyes fail to produce large flowers. Tubers are usually sold in late summer and early fall. Some fully grown peonies are sold in spring, but these plants often do not thrive in summer heat and drought. It is best to buy and plant garden peonies in the fall.

Tree peonies can be purchased and planted in spring or fall. Ample time is needed however to develop strong roots before winter freezing or summer drought. Because tree peonies are propagated by a slow and difficult grafting process they are expensive. Their hardiness, dependability and beauty make them a worthwhile expense. Many varieties are available.

Planting

Garden peonies - Dig soil to a depth of 12-18". If soil needs amending, do it now since peonies will likely remain in place a long time. Plant the tuber with the uppermost eye no more than 2 inches below the soil surface. Deeper planting may prevent blooming. Replace about half the soil, water thoroughly, fill with remaining soil, press down and water again. Set plants at least 3 feet apart.

Tree peonies - Prepare soil as above and amend if needed. Plant tree peonies deep with the graft about 4-5" below the soil surface. The graft can be recognized by ridging on stem and different bark texture. Refill soil as described above with garden peonies.

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General Care

Garden peonies require little care. Feed early each spring with a balanced fertilizer such as 5-10-5. Water regularly but avoid overwatering. Allow soil to dry somewhat between waterings. In fall, cut off stems at or just below soil surface. Peonies may need winter mulch their first year but are so hardy that winter protection is not routine.

Tree peonies are also very easy to care for. Feed early in the spring with balanced fertilizer such as 5-10-5 or 16-16-16. Water regularly, especially in summer heat, but avoid wet soil. Tree peonies are not cut back to the ground in fall. As with most woody shrubs, however, pruning may be done to maintain form and health, preferably after flowering. Tree peonies may need the protection of mulch their first winter, but do not need protection thereafter.

Dividing and Transplanting

Both garden and tree peonies do not like to be disturbed and may remain in the same location for many years. Tree peonies are not divided but may be moved if necessary, using standard shrub transplanting procedures. If garden peonies must be divided, do it in the early fall. To divide, dig plants carefully, remove foliage, hose dirt from roots and cut tubers into sections with 3-5 eyes. Plant tubers as described above. Never divide a plant less than 3 years old, as it may retard flowering. Garden peonies may grow for 15-20 years before needing dividing.

Diseases

Botrytis Blight is a fungal disease that attacks stems, buds and leaves. It is first noticed in the early spring when young stalks suddenly wilt and fall over. Flower buds become infected, turn brown and become covered with spore masses. Even opening flowers may be destroyed.

Cultural Control: Remove and destroy affected plant parts. Fall sanitation is particularly important. Remove and destroy all aboveground plant parts. Do not compost. If winter mulch is used, be sure to remove in early spring. Avoid overwatering and crowding plants.

Chemical Control: If cultural controls are not sufficient, apply a fungicide containing Mancozeb when young tips break through the ground. Follow two weeks later with another application. A third application may be needed.

Leaf Spots are caused by various fungi. Cut plants back to ground level in the fall. Thorough cleanup is important.

Insects

Thrips are tiny, dark, elongated insects that feed on leaves and blossoms. They cause distorted and discolored flowers and buds.

Control: Try spraying plants with an insecticidal soap. If this is not successful, apply Malathion according to label directions.

Ants - Gardeners are often concerned about the presence of large numbers of ants on their peonies. The ants are not harmful, they simply are feeding on the sweet substance secreted by the flower buds.