

A Wealth of Globed Peonies

By Harriet Custer
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A feast for the eyes

The peony, or paeony, is a flowering plant in the genus *Paeonia*, the only genus in the family Paeoniaceae. Peonies are native to Asia, Europe and Western North America. The peony is named after Paeon, a student of Asclepius, the Greek god of medicine and healing. According to mythology, Paeon was instructed by Leto, the goddess of fertility, to obtain a magical root growing on Mount Olympus that would soothe the pain of women in childbirth. Asclepius became jealous when Paeon was successful, and threatened to kill him. Zeus saved Paeon by turning him into the peony flower.

The peony has its etymological roots in ancient Greece, but was also well known in China as early as 1000 BCE. The plant was known primarily for its medicinal properties in both Asia and Europe. Often a subject of art because of its medicinal value as well as its beauty, the peony flower represented wealth, feminine beauty, and healing power in Christian symbolism during the Middle Ages.

Peonies were often painted with their ripe seed-capsules, because it was the seeds, not the flowers that were medically significant. In ancient China, the peony was used for flavoring food as well as for medicinal purposes before it became valued for its beauty.

In the early 8th Century, the peony was introduced by the Chinese into Japan. Records of the beneficial medicinal value of peony seed pods and roots survive from the 1st Century.

Peonies range in color from white through all shades of pink and magenta, as well as orange and yellow. Literally hundreds of cultivars are available to choose from. The American Peony Society has classified flower forms as Japanese, Anemone, Bomb, Semi-double and Double, generally varying according to the number of layers and structures of petals. The peony may have obvious stamens and inner buds, and have a flower-in-flower structure, which makes them so lush. There are three types of peonies: herbaceous, tree, and Itoh (intersectional).

Herbaceous peonies, the most common type, die back in the autumn and new shoots emerge in the early spring, generally blooming in May or June. Herbaceous peonies don't like to be moved once they're established, but roots can be dug and divided every three to four years to increase stock. Each root section should have two to three "eyes," and be planted 1-2 inches deep. The soil should be deeply dug with compost and a high phosphorus fertilizer worked into the planting site; they need to be well-watered

throughout the growing season. Varieties with large flowers should be supported by a frame installed as soon as the leaves begin to emerge.

The **tree peony** is a slow-growing woody shrub that can reach five to six feet tall. Blossoms are usually much larger than those on herbaceous varieties, and are available in single and double forms. Tree peonies generally bloom in April and May, earlier than herbaceous varieties; the foliage provides deep green color in the summer, changing to bronze and purple in the fall. The Japanese have become experts in grafting and hybridizing peonies, and most tree peonies now come from Japan.

The **Itoh, or intersectional peony**, a hybrid of the herbaceous and tree types, was developed in 1948 in Tokyo by Toichi Itoh. They are herbaceous, but their blossoms are as large as those of tree peonies. Advantages of Itoh peonies include stronger stems and flower production—up to fifty blossoms per plant when mature. Many cultivars have been produced from Itoh's original hybrids, which were primarily yellow. Itoh peonies are very hardy and require a period of winter chill to perform at their best.



An Itoh hybrid peony can be vibrant and colorful. *Photo by Nancy Crowell / WSU Skagit County Master Gardener.*

In general peonies are long-lived, disease resistant, and require very little care. They are deer-resistant, which is good news in the Pacific Northwest. Peonies can be grown in large pots (18-24 inches). They should be planted in a soil-based compost and replanted every third fall in a larger pot. Peonies are subject to the vine weevil, which likes to eat roots and foliage.

Their worst enemy, however, which particularly affects herbaceous varieties, is Botrytis, a fungus that wilts the young shoots in damp, warm spring weather. Wilting shoots should be removed or, in the case of the tree peony, cut back to healthy wood. Fungicides may be sprayed on the plants as a preventative. Providing good air circulation around the plants and keeping the planting area free from fallen leaves are good practices.



Peonies delight growers with their variations in formation and color. *Photo by Nancy Crowell / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners.*

Peonies make excellent cut flowers. If the side buds are nipped off before the main flower blooms, a stalk with a bigger and better-shaped flower will result. Branches should be cut when the buds are about to open and show their color, preferably early in the morning. Leave several leaves on the stalk, as the foliage is also very decorative. Condition the flowers in a cool room in deep water for a few hours before arranging them in a vase, where they may then last for ten to fifteen days

RESOURCES:

- Better Homes and Gardens. “Ask the Garden Doctor.” (2010). D. Schrock, ed. Des Moines, Iowa: Meredith Corporation.
- Hollingsworth, D. (2009). *Peony flower anatomy I-III*. American Peony Society. <http://www.americanpeonysociety.org/q-a/articles>
- Homeyer, H. (2002). *Notes from the Garden: Reflections and Observations of an Organic Garden*. Hanover, Massachusetts: University of New England Press.
- *The New Sunset Western Garden Book: The Ultimate Gardening Guide* (2012). K. N. Brenzel, ed. New York: Time Home Entertainment, Inc.
- What the Peony Means. <http://www.auntyflo.com/flower-dictionary/peony>
- “Tree Peonies.” Meyer, Jerry and Perry, Leonard, Extension Associate Professor. University of Vermont Extension System. Leaflet 62. <http://www.uvm.edu/~pass/perry/trpeony.html>

Note: some references in this article have been updated since its initial publication.

Know & Grow Workshop

- What:** **WSU Master Gardener Know & Grow - “Pure Peonies in Everson”**
Renel Anderson, co-owner of PurePeonies in Everson, Whatcom County, will speak about how to select, plant, grow and care for peonies. The farm grows 175 varieties of these exquisite beauties. She will talk about some of her favorites from old classics to the newest Itoh hybrids. Peonies do better with a good winter chill, so this should good year for them.
- When:** Tuesday, February 14
- Time:** 1:00 P.M - 2:30 P.M
- Where:** WSU Mount Vernon Northwestern Research and Extension Center, 16650 State Route 536 (Memorial Highway)
- Cost:** Free
- Questions** Call the WSU Skagit County Extension at 360-428-4270, ext. 0.