

The Wonderful World of Peonies

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September 9, 2022



An irresistible magic

Sometimes gardeners just fall in love. And why not when a plant produces fragrant and stunning blooms, is drought tolerant, long-lived, reliable, and lovely in three seasons? Peonies fit the bill in all departments, and the Pacific Northwest has one of the most favorable climates to grow these beauties.

Perhaps you still have the idea that peonies have a very short blooming season, and those heavy blossoms are held on spindly stems that flop over at the first sign of spring rains. You may be thinking of your grandmother's peonies, but many more dependable and sturdy varieties are being grown today.

If you are concerned about staking your peonies, the American Peony Society lists the best of the best for performance in their Award of Landscape Merit selections. Check out their website for suggestions and other valuable information (www.americanpeonysociety.org).

There are three basic types of peonies: herbaceous, tree and intersectional hybrids. The herbaceous peonies are the most commonly available and the cheapest. These perennials grow 18 inches to 3 feet in height and die back to the ground each year. Many have glossy, deeply lobed leaves and grow one full-headed bloom per stem.

Tree peonies are not trees at all but a woody shrub. Their graceful brown branches and deeply cut green foliage complement the watercolor hues of the flowers. Native to China and Japan, they are often pictured in art from that region.

Today most tree peonies are grafted onto herbaceous peony rootstock to make them more tolerant of low temperatures. When planting, be sure to set the graft 4-inches underground so roots will form on the upper tree peony section and grow true. Do not cut these plants to the ground in the winter as you would with herbaceous and intersectional hybrid varieties—you will lose next year's flowers.

Have patience. Tree peonies can take three or more years to bloom. Once they arrive, however, you will agree it was worth the wait.

The latest rage are the Itoh or intersectional hybrids that are a cross between herbaceous and tree types. They grow 2 to 3-feet tall with multiple, huge plump flowers (20–50 per mature plant) in stunning shades of copper, yellow, cream, pink, or lavender. They bloom for a longer period than

either of the aforementioned varieties and their stems are stronger, so they hold up their heads quite well. The foliage is nicely dense with a bluish tint and is always neat and tidy.



Blossoms on an herbaceous peony can be 5 or 6 inches in diameter and quite heavy, causing the stem to bend under their weight. A simple cage placed around the plant early in season can lend support to the tender stems. As the plant grows, the cage will disappear in the thick foliage. *Photo by Christine Farrow / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners.*

Flower types on peonies can be classified as single (5–10 petals in a single ring), semi-double (3–4 whorls of petals), and full double (ruffled petals that fill the center of the bloom). Additional classifications include Japanese and anemone (resembling single flowers but with a puffy center or raised mass of petaloids, often in a contrasting color) and bomb (doubles with a row or two of large outer guard petals that make it look like a bombe dessert).

The best time to plant bare root or container peonies in the Pacific Northwest is September through November. Because some varieties can be quite expensive, be sure to buy your plants from a reputable nursery or catalog company.

Once planted, peonies don't like to be moved. Find an area that is not crowded because these plants need good air circulation. They need six hours of sunlight per day, good drainage and a location which has a month of temperatures below 40 degrees F. (Beware of the microclimates in your yard that stay too warm.)

Begin by working your soil deeply, mixing in compost and watering well to settle the planting site. If you are planting bare root, plant the rhizome eye facing up no more than 2 inches deep. If planting from a container, place the plant in the hole so the top of the root ball is level with the soil surface.

Tree peonies have different requirements, as stated earlier. Mulch lightly the first winter but remove the mulch when the first reddish-purple stems appear in early spring. Do not fertilize the first year and **do not use animal manure**. Be patient because many peonies may take a year or more to bloom.



Watch for emerging peony buds in late February or early March. The herbaceous varieties will push their scarlet tips through the soil and begin to show leaves quickly. Pull back any remaining winter mulch. (Photo by Christine Farrow / WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardeners)

No fussing is necessary once the plant is in the ground. A light, balanced fertilizer or compost mulch may be applied once a year in the spring beginning the second year. Remove all the dead foliage in the fall.

Although peonies are fairly disease resistant, wet, and rainy conditions may cause *Botrytis* blight (*Botrytis paeoniae*). To control fungal diseases, provide good air circulation and proper sun exposure. Clean up plant debris and remove mulch from stems in the spring. Do not compost peony debris because *Botrytis* may be transferred to your compost mixture.

Cut peony blooms just as the flower buds are barely beginning to open, leaving at least a third of the leaves to nourish the plant for the following year. Cut in the early morning or evening when temperatures are coolest to prolong the cut bloom. These bouquets can last a week and make stunning arrangements.

Enter the wonderful world of peonies by planting one this year in a sunny spot in your garden. You, too, may be swept up in their irresistible magic.

RESOURCES:

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