

PEONIES

The *Paeonia* is a hardy perennial that needs little care and will bloom every spring for many years. There are 25 - 45 species of peonies, but the two most common species grown in the Inland Northwest are the *lactiflora* and *suffruticosa*.

Lactiflora

The most common peony species is commonly called a garden, or herbaceous, peony. It has full bushy stems that grow from thickened tuberous roots. Garden peonies grow 2-4 feet tall. The flowers will be single, Japanese, bomb, anemone, semi-double or fully double in form. They will be produced in late May or early June in colors of white, yellow, cream, pink, rose, or deep red.

Suffruticosa

The **tree** peony is a hardy, deciduous, woody shrub. The flowers are produced earlier in May and can reach a foot in diameter. The flowers can be single row of petals, semi-double or fully double with multitudes of petals. The colors available, include yellow, pink, white, rose, crimson, scarlet, almost black, purple and an array of color combinations. Recently, a cross between the herbaceous and the tree peony has been brought to market. The intersectional peony has the large flowers of the species *suffruticosa* and the smaller size and herbaceous stems of the *lactiflora* peony.

Site Selection

Garden and intersectional peonies will do well in any good garden soil that is 12-18" deep and drains well. Garden peonies do best in full sun. 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 like powdery mildew. Tree peonies flourish in full sun but can tolerate more shade than the garden peony.

Plant Selection

When buying garden or intersectional 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.

Tree peonies can be purchased and planted in spring or fall. 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 or intersectional 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 will prevent blooming. Replace about half the

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C090 - Peonies

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.

General Care

Garden and intersectional peonies require little care. Water regularly and allow soil to dry somewhat between waterings. Peonies prefer well-draining soil and will perish if soil consistently stays wet. In fall, cut off stems at 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. 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

Common disease, insect problems and control information can be found at: [Hortsense](#)

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.

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.

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. There is no need to control them.

Powdery Mildew - Peonies are susceptible to powdery mildew which can be mitigated by proper watering techniques and cultural control.