

### Peony Pleasures

Paeonia is a fragrant, drought-tolerant, long-living, easy-care perennial with spring, summer, and fall interest. So why was it nearly forgotten for several decades? We may never know, but gardeners everywhere have finally learned something their grandmother knew all along – every garden needs at least one peony.

The peony can be traced through numerous periods of history in Greece, the Roman Empire, China, Japan, France, England, and America. The first written account of the peony is in Homer's Iliad when Pluto, suffering from a wound inflicted by Hercules during the Trojan war, is cured with a peony remedy. Today, we mostly enjoy the peony for its ornamental qualities.

Herbaceous peonies are perennial and die completely back to the ground each year. Tree peonies are shrubs with woody stems. Since tree peonies require less winter chill, they are more popular in southern climates. This article focuses on the herbaceous peony, but most of the information applies to both.



In spring the peony pops out of the ground with reddish-purple stems. Next the leaves unfold and turn a rich green with interesting texture. The swollen flower buds are almost as lovely as the fully open flower. In fall the foliage turns yellow or orange, before dying back completely. Indeed, the only time the peony is not center stage in the garden is winter.

Fall is the best time to plant a peony, when the roots are dormant. Look for bare-root rhizomes in nurseries or catalogs. Peonies are not inexpensive, so if you order from a catalog, be sure it is a reputable company with quality stock. Select the site for your peony with care – they do not like to be moved. Peonies like at least 6 hours of sun per day, good drainage, and about one month of temperatures below 40 degrees. So do not plant

on a south-facing wall or any place that has a warm microclimate. Work the soil deeply at least a week before planting. Mix in compost and water well to settle the planting site. Plant the rhizome, eyes facing up, no more than two inches deep. Mulch for the first winter, but be sure to remove the mulch in spring when new growth starts. Planting a peony is not for the instant-gratification gardener. They take from two to three years to bloom. But be patient – it is well worth the wait.

After planting, you can pretty much forget about peonies. The less you fuss over them, the better they will do. A handful of bone meal, a light balanced fertilizer, or a compost mulch once a year in spring is sufficient. Do not over-fertilize and do not fertilize at all the first year after planting. The only other important maintenance task for a

peony is to remove the dead foliage in the fall. Leaving debris behind will encourage disease. Some peony stems tend to droop when blooming. If you do not like this look, stake the plant. A tomato cage placed in early spring works well.

Peonies are fairly disease-resistant, if cultural conditions are favorable. Wet rainy conditions (unheard of in the Pacific Northwest!) can cause botrytis blight. To control fungal diseases, provide good air circulation and proper sun exposure, clean up plant debris, and remove mulch from the plant stems in spring.

Garden author, Alice Harding sums it up well – "No garden can really be too small to hold a peony. Had I but four square feet of ground at my disposal, I would plant a peony in the centre and proceed to worship." [from *The Book of the Peony*, 1917]. You always knew you should listen to your grandmother -- so go plant a peony and discover the pleasure for yourself.

## References

Harding, Alice. *The Peony*. Portland, Oregon: Timber Press, 1993. This is a combination of Alice Harding's *The Book of the Peony*, 1917, and *Peonies in the Little Garden*, 1923.

*Sunset Western Garden Book*. Menlo Park, California: Sunset Publishing, 2001.

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