



## Growing & Planting Woody (Tree) Peonies

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**Site Selection:** Woody peonies will perform best on a site that drains well and will not be wet at any time of the year. Avoid sites that have root competition from trees and shrubs, as this will impact the growth of woody peonies. Lilacs are especially problematic as they compete heavily for nutrients and water that peonies use. The placement should get at least one half day of sun, or more (preferably morning sun vs. afternoon sun). Bright filtered light is also acceptable. The plants would prefer full sun all day, but the flowers last longer with some shade. Soil should be loose and not compacted if possible. Soils with high organic material are most preferred, but clay works well if it drains. Gravel and sandy soils generally drain well, but are often missing nutrients important for tree peony growth. Soils rich in lime seem to be best, such as those found in Eastern Wisconsin, which has underlying limestone layers. Overly wet soils are probably a woody peony's worst enemy; in fact, a fairly dry location will suit the plant very well. Since woody peonies do not generally like to be disturbed, select a planting place that will accommodate the plant for many years without movement. Remember to allow plenty of space around newly planted woody peonies, as they will grow larger in size as the years pass. Good spacing will allow free air movement around the plants, which prevents fungal attacks and provides greater exposure to sunlight.



Lutea hybrid 'Door County Sunset'



Lutea hybrid 'Anna Marie'  
at spring emergence

**Planting: Background...** Woody peonies are best planted in autumn, during the same period in which herbaceous peonies are planted. Most woody peonies are sold as grafted plants, with the woody peony growing on an herbaceous peony's root system. This plant configuration is perfectly acceptable and provides some advantages in cold climates versus own root woody peonies. One of the greatest mistakes in planting woody peonies is not planting them deeply enough. Grafted plants should have the graft union buried from

4" to 6" below the ground (or more), so that it is well protected from environmental changes. Tree peonies are best planted much deeper than their herbaceous relatives. Deep planting promotes growth from below the ground and creates a fuller looking plant. Burying the root system deeply will allow the stems to root quickly and encourage new bud formation below the ground. Small, young plantings of woody peonies may have only an inch or less of stem remaining above the ground after planting them and is quite acceptable. It is



Young graft with nurse root and own roots

not unusual for tree peonies to arrive in the mail with most or all of the stems cut off, leaving only roots and some eyes. This is very beneficial to the plant, as it will grow new stems the following growing season that are appropriate in size for the plant's root system. Typically, plants that arrive with many branches will lose these older stems over first or second winter and will become stressed due to their root system's inability to support old growth. Woody peonies may be planted upright, on an angle, or even placed on their sides when planting, to best accommodate the situation. Much of a pruned plant should be buried, as stated above, causing the stem tissue that is underground to convert to crown tissue and develop own roots and eyes. The overall benefits from this deep planting will reward the gardener in coming years with young, healthy stems and a better rooted plant that will more easily survive environmental issues above the soil surface.



Cut back woody peony

**Planting: Taking Action...** Start by digging a hole that will easily accommodate all of the peony's roots. The old adage 'A million dollar hole grow million dollar plant' is quite appropriate. The addition of some agricultural limestone to the bottom of the hole will be appreciated by the plant in almost all instances. Some growers mark the planting depth with a 'tie' or piece of tape, this marking is suitable for the grower's location, but may not be appropriate for your conditions. Plants grown in the Upper Midwest of the United States need to be planted deeply. Place the plant in the 'million dollar hole' and so that 4" to 6" of stem will end up below the surface. Orientation of the plant can be upright, but also on angle. Do not squeeze the plant into the hole, as the roots may push the plant out of the ground as they begin to grow. Fill the hole to approximately 3/4<sup>th</sup> full of earth around the plant and water the soil thoroughly, so that all air pockets are removed. Proceed to fill in the remainder of the hole with soil and add water as you fill. No further watering should be necessary after planting, unless drought conditions are occurring. Lightly press down the soil around the plant with your hands once you have finished. Give the plant a couple of inches of mulching the first year to keep a more even temperature and moisture level around the plant. Mulch also provides protection from freeze-thaw cycles, which can lift new plantings out of the ground during the winter season.



Young graft in second year after transplant

**Care:** Generally tree peonies do not require much care after their first season. During the first winter it is wise to mulch the plant so that it is not moved around by winter-spring freeze thaw cycles. Mounding or hilling soil around the bases of plants is recommended, as it provides extra insulation during the winter and sheds water away from crown and stems. This has proven a good technique for areas that experience heavy precipitation at various times throughout the year. Watering during very dry periods may be helpful, but is not generally need on well-established plants. Woody peonies prefer to be grown on the dry side, thus additional water is seldom required. If watering is necessary during extreme drought, water the base of the plant not the foliage.



Botrytis infection at stem bases

**Diseases and Pests.** Tree peonies, like all peonies, can get botrytis, a fungal disease which appears as black areas on the foliage, buds or stems. Suffruticosa group cultivars are most susceptible to botrytis infections and may be difficult to grow in some areas of the United States due to prevailing climate conditions. Prolonged cool, wet conditions can cause this fungus to be problematic and the best treatment is prevention. Keep the plants on the dry side and well ventilated. Stem and bud infections are most frustrating as they destroy potential leaves and flowers in early spring. If this fungus becomes a problem, cut away all diseased parts and throw them in the

trash. When stems are involved, cut well below the area of infection to assure that all diseased areas are removed and will not spread further in the plant. Commercial fungicides may also be used and a local garden center should be consulted (copper sprays tend to be most effective). Fall cleanup of the peony leaves is also a good method of avoiding this problem.

Rabbits, mice and voles can sometimes be problems in the winter months through damage caused by gnawing. Typically these animals chew or strip the vascular layers from the stems at their bases causing them to be girdled. The result is a dead stem above the damaged area. Removal of the dead stem is necessary, but the plants should produce new growth from below, if planted deeply enough. Rodent damage common occurrence, but is not fatal in most instances. Most plants will regrow and actually bloom on new stems, given plants are healthy and well established.



Vole damaged plant after being cut back in spring



Healthy Japanese suffruticosa cultivar planted on clay based soil

**Nutrition.** Fertilizing may be necessary on soils that have sand as a major constituent. Avoid high nitrogen fertilizers as this will cause excessive foliage to be grown at the expense of flowering. High nitrogen fertilizers also promote soft growth which is susceptible to disease. Woody peonies prefer limey soil with a PH from 6.5 to 7.5. A bit of agricultural lime worked in around the base of the plant is helpful in soils lacking this component. A dressing of composted manure in a wide swath around the plant will do no harm and enrich the texture of the soil. Avoid placing any manure directly on plants, or their bases, as this appears to encourage the growth of disease organisms. Bulb fertilizers are recommended, where needed in mid to late summer, as

plants begin to make annual root growth. A soil test is a good idea if you suspect that your plant is missing something nutritionally, as this will provide an accurate picture of actual needs. County extension agents can supply further information about soil testing and should be able to provide the assistance needed at a relatively low cost.



Hardy stemmed suffruticosa cultivar

No winter protection on established plants should be necessary. A tall plant may lose stems from time to time during very cold winter temperatures, but new growth will arise from the base of the plant, if planted deeply enough. From time to time dead wood will need to be cut from the plant to keep it looking good. In very cold climates (Zones 2 or 3), a number of growers have experimented with wrapping their plants with burlap or creating boxes for protection from the winter air. This works well, as long as the protective covering is removed before growth commences in the spring. Not all woody peonies have identical hardiness, thus choice of group and cultivar should be researched. As a general rule, Chinese origin

suffruticosa cultivars are least hardy, the lutea hybrids are somewhat more hardy, Japanese origin suffruticosas are even more resilient and the rockii hybrids the most hardy. Temperatures in our area commonly fall to -30F in the winter months with no die back of stems on rockii hybrid cultivars.

**Pruning.** In spring, after growth has initiated, is a good time to clean plants of old dead stems. Woody peonies can be shaped and thick growth can be removed at any time of the year, to the gardener's preference. Do not cut down woody peonies in the fall like you would a herbaceous or intersectional peony, since the woody stems carry some of the next year's flowering buds. One exception to this would be if you would like more stems to arise from the ground. In this case, cutting the woody stems to the ground encourages dormant buds below the ground to grow into stems the following season and sometimes these will bloom their first season, but more likely the next season. Old plants that lack vigor can often be rejuvenated with this practice. Avoid cutting very old plants that have large diameter woody stems completely to the ground. Instead cut them ½ way to the ground to promote new growth.



Basal shoots after hard pruning prior fall

The best transplanting time for woody peonies is fall, once next year's dormant buds have been made. Roots on the plant are developing in fall and continue long after the plants have lost their foliage. Generally spring planting of woody peonies is not successful due to the lack of root growth during this period. Plants that do not outright die from spring planting, will often show extreme wilting during summer and a lack of growth. If they remain living to the fall rooting season, it is likely they will establish and grow the next year.

The one exception to spring planting, are plants arriving from the opposite hemisphere. These plants arrive in a dormant state, rather than in active growth. These dormant plants are immediately planted in spring soil conditions, which are cool and



Lutea hybrid 'Cathedral Echo'

promote a small amount of rooting. Plants often grow some leaves by mid-summer and then produce abundant roots as soils cool in the fall. Dormant plants almost always survive spring planting versus those in beginning active growth.

In summation, woody peonies are a wonderful long-term addition to a garden. Some patience will be required while the plants mature, but in the long run they are extremely rewarding and will likely become one of the 'favorite' plants in the garden. Try them, you won't be disappointed.



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