



Growing Better Peonies and Getting the Most Out of Your Garden

Harvey Buchite-Hidden Springs Flower Farm Spring Grove, Minnesota

What makes peonies such a good garden flower choice? Peonies are one of the longest lived perennial flowers that we grow and are an excellent addition to your garden. What other perennial or flower can last for over 100 years and be handed down from generation to generation of family gardeners? In that respect they are more like a cherished tree planted in honor of a special event like those we planted at the birth of our children. The trees and peonies we planted then will be there long after they have children of their own. There are not too many other perennials that can make that claim. They not only provide beautiful flowers in mass that can be enjoyed in the garden or as excellent cut flowers, but after bloom the plant creates a wonderful shrub like background for other flowers that bloom later in the growing season. Peonies truly are one of the best values for your garden, paying blooming dividends for decades which few other flowers can match for their return on investment, especially when compared to some of the popular and short-lived garden perennials.



Selection is the key to peonies that don't fall down. By selecting peonies with strong stems you can avoid the hassle of staking them or putting wire hoops around them. All of the American Peony Society's Award of Landscape Merit peonies were selected for just this character of standing up off the ground while in bloom as well as good vigor, disease resistance and dependability. They come in a wide variety of colors and forms so you have numerous choices. They are an excellent selection for those looking for high quality and a neat garden appearance. Of course, peonies planted in shady locations will not have the strong stem strength as those grown in a sunny location.



Slow multiplication, but big rewards. Why do some peonies available one year and then disappear from the availability lists for several years? Unlike many perennials that can be grown from seed or division and harvested in less than one year, peonies are replanted and left undisturbed for up to four years before they have developed enough new root mass and stems to be harvested. That means the grower has invested at least four times the amount of time and expense in

bringing the peony to market compared to most other perennials. It is amazing really that some peonies cost as little as some of the perennials that mature from seed in 12 weeks. With their long life, peonies really are a good investment!

Plant in the fall and work with nature for better success. Peonies are unlike most other perennials because their main rooting season occurs in the fall. So, although they are not bulbs they are planted at the same time as daffodils and

tulips. Spring planted packaged peonies are stressed because they missed their proper rooting time when soil temperatures were becoming cooler. Many, spring packaged bare root peonies are cheaper because they are left over roots that did not sell in the fall at the proper planting missing their rooting season, which could not occur while they were in storage. Few people buying these roots and planting them in the spring can achieve a vigorous and beautiful display even after several years of recuperation. Give newly planted peonies time to settle into their new home. Peonies that can live for hundreds of years need time to get established when first plant-ed. Just like you weren't fully grown and talking a year after you came into the world, give your new peonies a chance to grow up, too. In two to three years you will be amazed and proud at how strong and beautifully they have grown. Just like anything that needs nurturing the more you pay attention to the plant's basic needs, the better success you can expect.

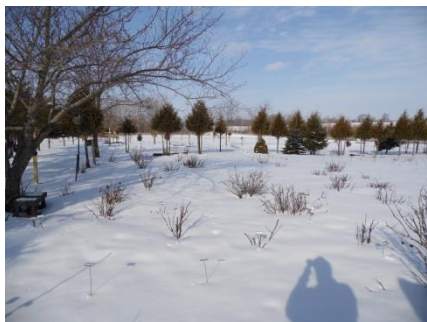
BASIC NEEDS FOR PEONIES

Sunlight. The regular garden peonies most of us are familiar with grow in sunny areas in the wild and that is where they like it to be planted in the garden. Eight to 14 hours of sun provides them with enough sun to build strong plants and produce maximum flowering. When they receive less than eight hours of sun they may only bloom with one or two flowers or not at all. They have been known to live for decades without blooming in less than ideal sun, attesting to their longevity. Tree peonies can flower with as little as four hours of direct sun but the more sun the plant receives the more flowers you will get on your plant.



Soil Conditions. Nowhere in nature do peonies grow in wet soggy soils and you can see this in their thick tuberous roots designed to store water which is an adaptation to well-drained and often rocky soils in their mountain habitats where many originated. In the western states of Oregon and Washington where soils are dense and water tables often high, along with heavy rainy seasons, peonies are planted at ground level and a mound of several inches of soil is placed on top of them so drainage is excellent. Rich organic matter in the soil is a combination for success, as well, since it can hold more nutrients and moisture during dry periods than may be experienced during the growing season.

Watering. Perhaps the most fundamental and important aspect of any gardeners success is proper watering. Peonies have two seasons when water is most critical. Rooting in the fall starting in late August until the ground freezes and again during bloom season when the buds need water to expand the cells in the petals to open the flowers. Peonies suffering from dry conditions may not have enough moisture to open their flowers or the blooms may be substandard in size and last very long in the garden. High Mountain Desert and the West Coast areas see phenomenal success with peonies if they pay attention to these critical watering periods.



Growing Zones are Vitaly Important. Peonies grow best in USDA Plant Hardiness Zones 3-8 and are adapted to freezing temperatures and are considered cold climate, growing perennials. If you can't grow apple trees or lilacs you most likely can't grow peonies. If you are unsure of your growing zone the National Gardening Association website will give you an instant response when you type in your zip code. Peonies need several hundred hours of near freezing temperatures to set new growth and flower buds every year. Without

cold temperatures the plants slowly decline and eventually die, even when giving them the best of garden care in warm climate zones.

You Can Easily Enjoy Five Weeks of Peony Bloom by Selecting Peonies Based on Their Bloom Week Ratings. While most gardeners are familiar with the common garden peony (*Paeonia lactiflora*), with several thousand selections from just that one species, there are 30+ different species that have been used to create new varieties and hybrids, extending the bloom season 30 days ahead of the normal peony bloom season and several weeks after. Some of the new types like the Itoh hybrids can bloom over several weeks just by virtue of their well-spaced secondary buds which bloom in succession one after the other. More and more professional peony growers are including bloom date ratings in their plant descriptions to assist you on your selection. For those gardeners in USDA Zone 8, we suggest avoiding the later blooming varieties which do not perform well in warmer growing conditions. Also, flower forms, such as the Single, Semi-Double and Japanese forms tend to open better in warmer growing zones.

Peony Fragrance is Genetic and in The Nose of the Gardener. If you want fragrant peonies you first have to select them from fragrant peony lists. Then it is important to remember fragrance is usually an adaptation in nature to attract a pollinator and so the best time to smell your peonies is when the pollinators are active-namely midmorning until about three o'clock in the afternoon. Fragrances are essential oils and the warm temperatures later in the day cause them to evaporate, so we recommend that you cut and enjoy your fragrant peonies earlier in the day. In the early morning the temperatures may be too cool to release the fragrant essential oils, so don't judge a peony too quickly until you have smelled them at their peak, between the hours of 10:00 am and Noon. As we age, our sense of smell changes, so that the fragrances that we remember from childhood may not be the same as what we are able to smell today.

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