



Peonies and Weeds

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One question many gardeners ask is how to control weeds. I suppose that we are all looking for some magic solution for this pesky problem and are unwilling to accept the basic fact that there really are only two ways: preparation and hard work. Undoubtedly this is the same with all types of gardens, and if we watch farmers working in their fields, we will quickly realize that planting and harvest are only two of the parts in their process. Long before planting time, steps are made to prepare the soil, and while the crops are growing, considerable efforts are made to eliminate competition from weeds.

Gardens are no different and even the smallest flower patch needs the same considerations. Many articles on growing peonies start with the admonition of caring for the soil. Good soil makes a good garden. A major part of having good soil means getting rid of the weeds before anything is planted. A good presentation on planting peonies will include information on eliminating weeds before planting.

Some people seem to have the idea that peonies are naturally weed resistant. No doubt they have seen old plantings of peonies still blooming on original homestead locations amid tall grass and brush. They forget that these peonies were once established with loving care, and are unaware how much better the peony plants could thrive under proper conditions. While it is true that well established peony plants will tolerate a lot of abuse, a new planting in that kind of environment would stand little chance of survival. Perhaps a leading cause of failure to thrive in new plantings of peonies is because there was lack of sufficient preparation.

Even with good soil preparation, weed control is an on-going process. Weed seeds will blow in and birds will spread them. For sure weeds can cover a planting in only a week of the right kind of weather. Should the weather be rainy for a few extra weeks making cultivation impossible, the weeds rejoice to gain the upper hand.

If the area has been well chosen, the weeds should not be so numerous and not so difficult to manage. Certainly the first year after planting the peonies is the most critical time since the peony plants will still be small and the weeds will have access to all the light they need. Remember too that just one weed plant allowed to go to seed will create a plague lasting for years. Once weeds have started to go to seed, they need to be completely removed and burnt or sent off to a dump site, so that they will not reseed the ground. Just composting is inadequate.



In a well-tended garden of mature peony plants, the weeds may not be numerous as the peonies will crowd them out, but even here good horticultural habits will bring good results. A regular hoe-through also permits the observation of rogue seedlings which in time can be weeds as bad as any other. This is the primary reason why many gardeners remove the flower heads as soon as they have finished blooming. But even with the best of care, some especially pernicious weeds, for me Canadian thistles, Quack grass, and Tall hedge mustard in particular, seem still to manage to get established.

Planting peonies in the middle of an established perennial flower bed can be as bad as planting in a weed patch. In general I would recommend allowing a square yard of space for every peony bush. Strong growing perennial flowers like Irises, Daylillies or Monarda, among many others, have very extensive root systems and will cause heavy competition with newly planted peonies. Established peonies may send roots down quite deeply and eventually get to a zone below these other shallow-rooted perennials, but when peonies are newly planted, care needs to be taken to keep these other competitors away. On the other hand, even well established peonies will run into competition from those plants with deep roots, like boxwood hedges, evergreen trees, willows, or even large rose bushes. Peonies should be planted well away from those.

So what can be done if the weeds get the upper hand anyway? Can't we solve the problem with modern herbicides?

Herbicides are a useful tool, like the others we use, and they need to be considered in that way, not as some kind of magic wand. The misuse of herbicides can cause greater harm than the benefits we might hope to obtain from them.



Herbicides come in different types. Foliar contact herbicides like Round-up™ may be the best known. They will kill anything they touch, but do not move through the soil and usually break down in a week or so. Plants accidentally sprayed with these herbicides can still be saved if doused generously with water in the first few hours after spraying. These herbicides also can drift, especially when sprayed in a fine mist form under high pressure. The best way for gardeners to use them for a few weeds, is to use a sponge or paintbrush to apply the chemical directly to the leaves of plants you want to kill and avoiding the rest.

Another large group of sprays are those like 2,4-D and Banvel™, with many new ones released every year. In no way would I ever recommend their use in a garden. They are just too volatile to control in small spaces, and most garden plants are very sensitive.

They also have a long residual effect and some have residues that can linger in the soil or plant tissue for years. When they do break down they can form or recombine to make unknown chemical compounds. Suffice it to say that the toxin Agent Orange is a cousin to these chemicals. Still these are often used in lawn sprays, because grasses are mostly resistant to their chemical action.

One contact spray I have used with peonies is Stinger™. This herbicide is very selective and does not harm peonies when used carefully. It also does not harm grass. However its residual carryover stays for a very long time and when used repeatedly in the same area will build up to a harmful dose even for peonies. I would not recommend it at all for a general broadcast spray over the top of a group of peonies. A spot spray use can be very effective on thistles, burdock, alfalfa, clover and other deep rooted plants that are resistant to Roundup. A special note of caution: Do not use Stinger anywhere near potatoes or asparagus. My experience has taught me that the tiniest drift will severely damage them. Fusilade™ and Over The Top™ grass killer are two selective herbicides that work only on grass and are quite effective.

The last group of chemicals I want to include here are fumigants and pre-emergent herbicides. In an article Roy Klehm wrote about planting peony seeds, he mentions that he has used methyl bromide to sterilize the soil. This is a short acting chemical that will sterilize the ground and kill all existing weed seeds. Because it has a short residual life, other seeds can be planted shortly after using. Some are concerned that this type of chemical will also kill beneficial microbiological life in the soil, but that would seem to be a small price to pay for the huge benefit of weed free soil, especially considering that peony seeds often do not germinate for two or even three years. However, for those who are looking for a chemical free solution, covering the area to be planted for a season with a sheet of black plastic also works to sterilize the soil.

For established plantings there are a couple of chemical choices. Preen™ is one that is readily available, but its effect is limited mostly to grasses and to a small range of weeds. I have used Gallery™ which is used as a liquid spray, and Snapshot™ which combines Gallery™ and Treflan™ in a granular formula. Surflan™ is another I have used with great effectiveness. I have never seen any damage to mature peonies from this, even when making direct contact on the leaves. However, I have never used this on small seedlings, not wanting to risk the chance of damage. These are all applied to the surface of the ground either as a wet spray or as a loose granular that can be spread with a hand fertilizer spreader. Jewel™ is the only pre-emergent herbicide I know of that is specifically labeled for peonies. However, I do not understand why that is so. Jewel™ has caused significant leaf burn on my plants, so the only way I use it now is to sprinkle it on the ground before all the snow is melted. It is recommended to rotate the pre-emergent herbicide used from year to year, as some weeds are able to build up resistance after some time.

These herbicides are a real time saver in large gardens and useful in most perennial plantings. They keep any new weeds from germinating, and usually will last through an entire growing season. Mostly they require rain or some incorporation for activation. If applied before a first cultivation in the spring, they can reduce the need for subsequent weed removal to a minimum effort.

When talking about the vigor and resilience of weeds, my neighbor used to say that they were around before he got on the land, and would still be there when he left. While one might admire them for their tenacity, some preparation and watchful effort can ensure that they don't ruin our gardening plans. Good initial efforts will help to produce big results with the peonies we love so dearly.

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