

American Peony Society Frequently Asked Questions



What is the American Peony Society (APS)?

The Society was established in 1903 to promote cultivated peonies and foster studies to improve their worth as a garden plant. It does this through a variety of educational activities, publications, a website and social media. Since 1974 it also has been the official international registrar of peony cultivars.

Who are its members?

Members include commercial growers, hybridizers and collectors. But the large majority are home gardeners who share a love for the dozens of species and thousands of cultivars that make up the genus *Paeonia*.

What are some of the primary ways the APS carries out its mission?

- Its website, <http://americanpeonysociety.org>, provides easy access to a wealth of information about growing peonies, links to other related websites, current and upcoming society events, information on thousands of registered peony cultivars, a store front for APS publications, and access to the society's seed exchange program.
- The annual convention offers educational seminars, tours of some of the finest peony gardens and collections, an opportunity to socialize with other peony enthusiasts and a venue for the flowers themselves by way of the national show in which hundreds of blooms from both commercial and amateur growers throughout the country are judged by a panel of experts.
- Special awards annually highlight some of the best cultivars both for their beauty as flowering plants and their value to the home landscape.
- A quarterly bulletin keeps members abreast of the newest cultivars and provides information on up-date growing and hybridizing techniques, along with events at regional peony societies.
- Its Facebook page provides a place for sharing photos and information from gardeners and growers around the world.

How can I join the American Peony Society?

Membership information, benefits and costs are available on the APS website, or at the annual APS Convention. Please visit <http://americanpeonysociety.org/membership/membership-online> and complete the process online or download a mail-in application. Individual or commercial memberships are available, as are gift memberships.

Why should I plant peonies in my garden?

- The most obvious answer is the sheer beauty of their blooms. It's difficult to find another garden plant that can match peony flowers for their stunning variations of color and form. The size of their blooms make a bold statement in any garden setting and command attention when arranged in a vase. And there are few rivals for the opulent scent of most peonies.
- Achieving that level of beauty in the garden doesn't require all the pruning, spraying, protecting and dividing that, for example, roses or many other perennials require. While peonies may look like delicate charmers, relatively few insects, critters or diseases will harm them. They even prefer the colder temperatures of northern gardens and they are fairly drought tolerant. Plant a peony where it can get at least a half day exposure to the sun, in average soil with average drainage, and even a novice gardener will be rewarded by extraordinary beauty.
- Peonies are also a great bargain. As perhaps the most perennial of all garden perennials, the initial cost of a quality peony root amounts to just pocket change over the life of a peony. While many gardeners are happy to get six or seven years of out most of their perennial plantings, the peony grower can count on decades of blooms.
- With the advances in peony breeding there are now peonies that will be at home in nearly every garden. These include hundreds of varieties of herbaceous peonies, which die back to the ground each year, or the shrub-like tree peonies, which tolerate more shade. The relatively new intersectionals—crosses between the herbaceous and tree peonies—are also now readily available to gardeners. Peonies do best in USDA zones 2-8.

How do I plant a peony?

First find a site away from root or shade competition from other shrubs or trees. Although tree peonies can benefit from some light shade, most common garden peonies like at least 6 hours of full sun. Peonies should not be sited in areas in which water puddles for a day after a heavy rain. A silt loam soil is best, although peonies can do well in conditions from clay to sand. Dig a hole about twice the width and depth of the root you are planting. Replace half the soil with compost, and begin filling back in, creating a slight mound in the center. Place the root with the eyes or buds facing up. These eyes should be 1 to 2 inches below the level of the soil surrounding the hole. Fill in the soil around the roots and over the tops of the eyes. If you live in an area where the ground freezes in winter, wait until early winter and cover with a mulch of coarse bark or pine boughs to reduce freezing and thawing, which can work a root up out of the soil. Remove the mulch in early spring. No fertilizer is needed that first year.

Thereafter, fertilize lightly in early spring and after flowering with an organic or chemical fertilizer low in nitrogen.

- If you are planting an Itoh or Intersectional peony, plant about 2 inches deeper than for other herbaceous varieties.
- For grafted tree peonies make sure the graft connection with the nurse root is several inches below the soil surface.

Why won't my peonies bloom?

A variety of cultural problems or disease can keep a plant from flowering.

- If they were planted too deeply. When planting herbaceous peony roots, make sure the eyes are no more than 2 inches below the surface. Dig up the root and replant.
- If the root division was very small it may take 2 years or more for a bloom. Buy 3-5 eye root divisions from a quality peony nursery.
- If a large plant was dug and replanted without dividing, the peony may languish for a number of years. It is best to divide a large root into 3-5 eye sections with the roots trimmed back to 6-8 inches in length.
- Flower buds may not fully develop if the plant is undernourished. Top dress with compost or fertilizer placed a few inches out from the base of the plant and provide adequate water during times of drought.
- Too much nitrogen fertilizer can encourage stem and leaf growth at the expense of flower buds. Use a low nitrogen fertilizer.
- Too much shade can reduce flowering. Six or more hours of full sun is best, although tree peonies can benefit from some light shade.
- Root competition from neighboring trees or shrubs may also reduce flowering.
- A late cold snap or infection by botrytis (also called gray mold) may cause flower buds to abort.

Do peonies need ants to bloom properly?

Ants do not affect the performance of a peony. They are simply there to feed on the sugary sap exuded by the buds before the flower opens.

How do I protect my peonies from botrytis and other fungal or bacterial diseases?

Most importantly remove and destroy or dispose of all herbaceous peony stems and foliage each fall. Do not compost. Also try to plant peonies where there is good air circulation around each plant. If you are still having problems, begin a regimen of fungicide applications when new peony shoots begin to emerge in the spring, spraying or dusting the plants every 10 days up until they begin to bloom. It is best to rotate between two different types of fungicides. Both organic and chemical options are available.

Why is my tree peony suddenly growing different looking leaves and flowers?

This can occur with tree peonies which often are propagated by grafts on herbaceous peony rootstock to get them off to a good start. Sometimes the wrong cultivar of herbaceous peony is used or some crown material was inadvertently left on the herbaceous root. When this happens, the rootstock may start sending up shoots of the herbaceous cultivar. Because the herbaceous plant is often more vigorous it can overtake the tree peony. Remove these odd shoots as soon as they come up. You may need to dig up the peony in the fall and discard the herbaceous root segment. The situation can generally be avoided by planting grafted tree peonies several inches deeper than where the herbaceous root is attached.

Should I wait until fall to plant the potted peony purchased from a garden center in the spring.

Although peonies do best when purchased as bare root plants in the fall, spring potted peonies often do well if planted as soon as possible. Take care to disturb the roots as little as possible. Make sure the crown of the plant is preferably an inch or two below the surface of the soil. In the case of grafted tree peonies, make sure the graft connection is several inches below the surface. Spring planted roots may need more attention to ensure soil moisture is adequate.

What is an Itoh or Intersectional peony?

These are herbaceous peonies that have been crossed with a tree peony. They produce large flowers and lush green foliage that remains attractive throughout the growing season. Because their stems are semi-woody, these peonies tend to hold up their flowers very well even in wet or windy weather. Like herbaceous peonies, the stems should be cut back in the fall and all foliage removed from the garden. As is the case with all other peonies, they are long-lived.

How often do I need to divide my peonies?

The short answer is “never.” Unlike many perennials, peonies can thrive in the same location for decades without dividing. However, you may want to divide a peony to grow more plants of that cultivar. This can be done in the fall much like dividing many other perennials by using a sharp spade to cut through the crown of the plant to remove a section of root bearing 3-5 or so eyes. You also may want to move a peony because shade or root competition from nearby shrubs or trees are causing your peony to decline. In this case, dig all the way around about 8 inches from the outermost stems and pry the plant out of the ground. Remove as much soil as possible from the root and divide it into pieces that have about 3-5 eyes and at least a couple of roots 6-8 inches in length.

These pieces will grow more rapidly than if you were to replant the entire root.

My grandmother’s peonies always toppled over in spring rains. Are there varieties that are sturdier?

Gardeners can stake or cage their herbaceous peonies to prevent this problem. But peony hybridizers have come up with some better solutions to peony flop. Nearly all Itoh or Intersectional peonies hold up their blooms well even in inclement weather because of their semi-woody stems. The American Peony Society also has a committee of experts who are continually evaluating and selecting herbaceous varieties that stand up well to the weather. Each year they add a number of new varieties to the list of peonies given the APS Award of Landscape Merit. That list can be found on the APS website at <http://americanpeonysociety.org/awards/award-of-landscape-merit>.

Where can I find more information on peonies?

The APS website (americanpeonysociety.org) offers a wealth of downloadable information on peony types, growing and care information, peony events, where to buy peonies, local peony clubs and more.