

How, When and Where to Buy Peonies

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It might seem unnecessary to have instructions for buying peonies. After all can't we just go down to the local garden center and get what we want?

Well, with peonies all is not quite that simple. First of all, peonies are not available for the whole growing season, as are most other garden plants. We are accustomed to buying tulips and other spring blooming bulbs in the fall and understand that one does not go down to the garden center in July and pick up some nice big tulip plants to set in the ground. Peonies are much like that. Secondly, with several thousand cultivars to choose from, including the exciting new varieties that are released every year, locating the precise variety one might be looking for can be quite a challenge. What we might most want is very unlikely to appear at the local garden center, no matter how well run that is.

However, peonies often are available as potted plants. These are roots that were potted in the fall, undergone cold treatment, and are actively growing in the warmth of spring. Later they may sport buds and even flowers. Peony plants in gallon or larger sized pots are usually quite an acceptable choice. But there are some cautions. Make sure the plant is free of disease. Plants in pots seem to be more susceptible to botrytis and phytophthora, especially if a moisture retentive planting medium is used. They also need careful tending during the first year of growth, taking extra care to make sure the soil is never too dry or too wet. Even so, peonies purchased as potted varieties usually are more expensive than when purchased as bare roots, and often take an extra year to recover and begin the usual growth and increase. When a long desired variety is finally found as a potted plant at a reputable source, it may be the only opportunity we have.

Potted peonies have a more notorious downside, however. These are pots of a quart size or smaller sometimes offered in general nursery catalogs or big outlet stores. These are seldom named varieties but often only labeled "pink", "white", or "red". Even the most proficient of peony growers know that these are most likely not any outstanding varieties, and not vigorous enough to grow successfully. They are best left in the store.

Having said all of that we can confirm that the most usual and usually the best way to acquire new peony plants is to purchase bare root divisions in the fall. Because of the large number of specialty peony venders and the huge numbers of varieties available, the hardest part is deciding what to get. There is absolutely no substitute for seeing the plant growing and blooming in someone's garden. It is very difficult to capture all of the nuances of a peony bloom in a photograph, and a single photograph can never demonstrate the full character of the growing plant. In addition, local growing conditions like weather, soil type and individual care can make large differences in the appearance of the same variety. It is always best to visit a peony garden close to where you live. The exhibitions and tours promoted by the American Peony Society and other regional peony societies are a great way to become acquainted with the wonderful choices the peony world has to offer. Producers of peony catalogues do their best to provide accurate descriptions but details like color and fragrance can be very subjective. What may be watermelon red to some is simply drab mauve to others and what someone finds to be a wonderful fragrance could seem more like old shoes to you. So if you are thinking of investing in these aristocrats of the perennial world, make sure you become informed, and there is no better way to start than by going out and observing and sniffing. Once you know exactly what you want it is time to locate a source for purchasing the cultivar.

If you have a friend who is planning to divide an older plant and is willing to sell a piece, you have your deal in hand. Local garden clubs often have plant exchanges to work with. The internet is a source of many of the finest peony growers and the APS bulletin advertisers are all good sources. Look for a web site that has lots of

information about the growers as well as useful information on peony culture. Growers that act as if the peony plants were their grandchildren will usually provide the highest quality roots. Purchasing a peony root from the same firm that grew it is the most reliable way to get good material. Regional peony societies often have fall root auctions that can be the best opportunity to locate unusual and exceptional varieties.

One will usually find that the vendor will expect full payment at the time the order is placed. This is to guarantee your shipment when the roots are dug in the fall. It is generally a good idea to order early, as many of the varieties most wanted are in limited supply. An order placed as early as April could be returned and marked "sold out", especially if it is a highly anticipated first time offer. Also, there is no reason to expect a larger root division for a higher priced variety. Reputable vendors try to keep their divisions all of a standard size, usually 3-4 eyes. The higher price reflects scarcity and demand, not the size of the root.

Now before making the final decision, go through a check list to see if the intended purchases are going to be suitable. Is there a large enough piece of good ground available for the plant to grow undisturbed for several years? Is the chosen variety tall or short enough to show well in the designated location? Is there time available to place supports, if that will be necessary? If not, a variety with a landscape award designation might be more suitable. Will the color of the flower make a harmonious blend with the surrounding plants? Planting a peony should not be just planting anything that comes along. Careful consideration of possible choices will help to guarantee satisfaction for many years to come. I find it terribly sad to have someone comment negatively about a peony plant that was poorly selected and not planted in a suitable location. "I don't know why I ever planted that" they might say, "Peonies just are not good garden flower choices". Some extra time spent in selection and purchase of the right varieties could have made a big difference in preventing that disappointment and creating a great success.

