



Uncanoonuc Mt. Perennials

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PEONIES

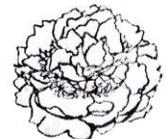
Herbaceous Peonies

Most herbaceous peonies are hybrids of *Paeonia lactiflora* (the Chinese peony) and/or *Paeonia officinalis* (a species hailing from Europe). They die down to the ground after hard frost and emerge from the root every spring. These are the most familiar peonies, long beloved for their gorgeous June blooms and their mounds of handsome foliage that add weight and texture to the garden all season. Hardy to zone 3, they are very long-lived and very low maintenance. Their sumptuous, often fragrant blossoms come in a broad range of colors including every shade of pink, white, red, coral and even (some newer hybrids) yellow. The flowers take many forms which are illustrated below. Peonies are the quintessential cut flower; the foliage is also prized in floral work.

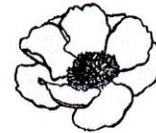
Peonies thrive in full sun or very light shade. They prefer a fairly rich, moist, well-drained soil. Dig the planting hole 1 - 1½' deep and 2' wide. Work in a generous amount of compost or other organic matter. Don't plant too deeply which results in few if any blossoms. Set potted peonies at the same level they were growing in the container. If you're planting bare root divisions make sure the buds (called eyes) are only 1 - 1½" below the soil surface. In real life the eyes will not be all on one plane. Just make sure the top eyes aren't too deep. Keep your new transplants watered well for several weeks. Water deeply and less often rather than shallowly every day. Peonies are best in slightly acid soil and benefit from an application of a balanced fertilizer every spring. (See our tip sheet - *The ABCs of Fertilizing Ornamental Gardens* - for lots of good information on liming and feeding.) Putting bark mulch around the plants helps keep moisture in, weeds down and just plain looks good. The heavier, double flower forms have a tendency to flop especially after heavy rain. Special peony supports or "rings" are inexpensive, readily available and unobtrusive. Put them on early in the season when the peony shoots are just emerging. They'll disappear as the plants fully leaf out. After bloom, deadheading (cutting off the faded flowers) enhances the appearance of the plant. After hard frost, clip the foliage off within a few inches of the ground and dispose of it in the trash. Sanitation helps control Botrytis and powdery mildew - two fungus diseases that can affect peonies. (See below)



japanese



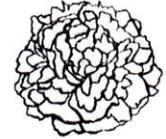
semi-double



single



bomb



double

Dividing

Peonies don't require periodic division, but it can be done if you want to multiply your plants, they have outgrown their spot in the garden or they won't fit into your supports anymore. September is the perfect month. Chop the foliage off and dig the plant out of the ground. Depending on the size of the plant this can take some doing. Eat your Wheaties or find someone strong. In my book, that's why God made teenage boys. Next, hose off the root system - there's a lot to be said for being able to see what you're doing. Using a sharp spade or large knife, cut the root system into pieces making sure each one has three to five or more eyes. The bigger the division, the heavier the bloom next year. That bit about peonies not blooming for the first year or two after planting ("They've got to settle in...") is plain hooley. It's about size.

Potential Problems

Ants! Don't panic. In truth, they're invited. Peony buds have glands called extrafloral nectaries which secrete super sweet nectar. Ants visit peony buds and flowers to feed on this nectar. They do not harm the flowers. Their presence may even serve to protect the peonies by keeping other insects away. And that bit about peony buds requiring ants ("The buds won't open unless you have ants...") well, that's just not true either. Sorry, Aunt Sue.

Botrytis Blight or Grey Mold is a fungal infection. It's a common problem especially in very cool, wet spring and early summer weather. It infects the developing buds which fail to mature, turn brown and may develop a felty grey covering of fungal spores. The fungus can also infect emerging shoots, flowers at any stage and leaves which develop irregular dark brown blotches. Good cultural practices and sanitation are your best defenses. Give your peonies lots of sun, good drainage and plenty of room so the foliage can dry off quickly after rain. On a dry day cut off any infected plant parts and dispose of them in the trash. Do the same when you cut your peonies back in the fall. Protective fungicidal sprays may be used early in the season. Make sure the material you choose has Botrytis listed on the label and follow the directions carefully.

Powdery Mildew is another fungus that can infect peonies. In early summer you may notice fluffy white splotches on the foliage. Later the entire plant may look like it's been dusted with flour or wood ashes. It's more of a cosmetic problem than a real threat to your plant's health. Like Botrytis, powdery mildew is weather driven, and one bad year doesn't mean it'll be bad again next year. The same cultural and sanitation practices recommended for minimizing the incidence of Botrytis apply here too. Preventative fungicidal sprays may be used, but - it's a big bad world out there - and a little tolerance of imperfection is advised.

Deer - just kidding! Deer aren't prone to browsing on peony foliage or buds. Another attribute that puts them squarely in the low maintenance camp.

Tree Peonies

Tree peonies originated centuries ago with the Chinese peony, *Paeonia suffruticosa*. Later, *Paeonia lutea* and other species were used in the breeding of modern hybrids. They are not trees at all, but true woody shrubs, hardy to zone 4. They are clothed in very dressy, deeply notched foliage which remains attractive all season. Their May bloom is a highlight of the gardening year. Enormous, silky and impossibly beautiful, they come in myriad shades of red, yellow, pink and white. There are semi-double and fully double forms. The basic care of tree peonies parallels the advice given for herbaceous peonies. Some differences to bear in mind exist. Do not cut tree peonies down in the fall - they're shrubs. Pruning at all is rarely needed. Tree peonies benefit from a bit more shade than their herbaceous counterparts. It's not necessary, but it will prolong their bloom time. Plant tree peonies with the graft union (a lumpy knob low on the stem) 4 - 6" below the soil surface. Because tree peonies are grafted, suckers from the root stalk can appear especially the first few years after planting. If you notice herbaceous peony foliage or flowers growing out of your tree peony, cut those stalks off just as low as you possibly can.

Intersectional or Itoh Peonies

Intersectional peonies are crosses between herbaceous and tree peonies. They're called Itohs after Toichi Itoh, the Japanese breeder who first created them. What a legacy! Itohs have the gorgeous foliage and flower forms of the tree peonies, but are herbaceous and die back to the ground each fall. Hardy to zone 4; grow them as you would herbaceous peonies.