



Herbaceous Peony Culture and Care

Plant Material, Site, Planting Time, Planting and Care

STARTING PLANT MATERIAL

Many a gardener has been tempted to purchase the largest clump of peony they can find in hopes that the plant will flower the next spring. While a large clump will usually bloom the next spring, it may not the following year and then go slowly into decline. The reason for this is that the plant needs room to grow new roots and this space is taken by large older roots that are storage vessels. These older large roots often produce few new feeder roots and are likely to decay, causing plants to spiral out of good health. In recent years we've encountered gardeners and a couple of commercial growers who indicate that they have had good experiences with the transplant of large clumps, unfortunately our experience (and many others) has been completely opposite of this. Peonies divisions with 2 to 4 roots and 3 to 5 dormant buds (eyes) are likely to supply good growing results and are the standard for peony propagators. Roots on divisions are often trimmed back and the largest roots will have been removed to encourage new root growth. Again, our long-term plantings have always done best with divisions that do not have extensive root systems when planted. Promoting new root growth that will support the plant long term is desired, not short term results.

Many of the hybrid peonies have strong stems and do not require staking or the placement of rings to keep them from flopping. The older *P. lactiflora* may need some assistance with support, but are well worth the effort for their cut flower and fragrance capabilities. If you do not want to deal with plants that need support, ask or look at descriptions to avoid them. The American Peony Society awards plants that are evaluated for landscape merit and all of the selections will stand up without support. For further information visit: <https://americanpeonysociety.org/about/awards/#award-of-landscape-merit>

SITE

Site selection is the most important factor in successfully growing any peony. Pick a place to plant the peony in which it will not need to be disturbed for a number of years and receives at least 6 hours of light, preferably full sun. Planting the peony too close to trees and large shrubs should be avoided since their roots will compete for water and nutrients. Herbaceous Peonies, like all peonies, prefer good garden soil that is well drained and has good amounts of organic matter. They can be grown in clay soils, and do quite well, provided it drains well. Never plant peonies in a place that is continuously wet or where water stands during any season. Sandy soils should be avoided as they do not provide needed nutrients for quality peony growth.

WHEN TO PLANT

Peonies do best when planted in the fall (for Wisconsin late August through October). This is important, as peony plants grow almost all of their root system in late fall. Roots planted in spring depend on their reserves, since no new roots will likely be grown until fall. Spring planted peonies often struggle to become established or fail due to their rooting habits. Avoid planting in the spring! Plant them within a day or two of arrival if bare root.

Plants purchased in containers during the spring/summer period should be held in their original container and submerged in the garden for the summer months. Make sure to keep them watered, as their root systems are not part of the native soil around them. Dig up the containers in the fall, remove the plants from their containers, cut down the stems to 2 inches, shake or wash off all the potting mix and plant them in their permanent site (in fall). These plants typically are slower to establish than bare root divisions, but will develop nicely with this treatment.

PLANTING

The roots, which will have next year's eyes located on the crown in late summer, should be placed in a hole that will easily accommodate them. Squeezing the roots in to the hole could cause the peony to heave during freeze-thaw events, if surrounding soil is hard. It is best to plant herbaceous peonies with the eyes approximately 2" below the soil surface-roots will be deeper. If planted too deeply the plant may not grow and flower properly for an extended period of years. Most peonies are sold as bare roots in the fall and will have the stems cut off or removed. When planting we advise spreading the roots evenly throughout the hole and filling it two-thirds full of soil, then water to help the soil settle. Fill the remainder of the hole with soil and water again. In another week or two come back, make a slight mound over the plant, the mound will settle over the winter and your peony hole will not become a depression for collection of water over the winter and spring. During the first winter it is also recommended that the peony be mulched so that frost does not heave it out of the ground in the spring. During the following years it is not necessary to mulch the plant for protection.

Plants may not flower the first season after planting and will often look small in stature compared established plants. Peonies certainly follow the rule of sleep the first year, creep the second year and leap the 3 year, thus patience is required. During the first couple of seasons flowers may not appear to be the form or size of the cultivar's standard. Don't be alarmed, peonies take time to get their act together and will likely become more uniform as the years go by.

CARE

Special attention should be given in the fall to cutting down herbaceous peonies and removing the stems and foliage from the area of the planting. Peonies can acquire a fungal disease called botrytis, which shows up as black areas on stems and leaves during cool damp or wet weather. To avoid incubating this disease, through old foliage, it is wise to remove foliage from the garden in the fall when plants begin to show signs of going dormant for the year.

During the summer months peonies do not make much growth above ground, having done the majority of this work earlier in the spring. Old flowers can be removed, but allow the foliage to stay on the plant as long as possible. Peonies may look like they are doing very little during the hot days of summer, but they are busy storing food for the next year. While established peonies are quite drought resistant, this does not mean they will perform optimally in dry soil conditions. Keeping plants evenly moist is helpful in producing a better plant in years to come. Water the ground deeply during dry periods. Avoid sprinkling the foliage, as this may encourage disease. Many peonies make fine landscape specimens throughout the summer months, thus allow them to display their foliage and make silent growth.

In autumn many of them produce leaves of gold, orange and red—adding to their value as a three season plant. During the fall months (right up to frozen ground) peonies will grow new roots, which will support the plants in the coming year(s). Water is important during this period, thus if drought conditions are impacting your garden, water the ground for a number of hours to help plants produce good root growth.

In most instances, peonies need little fertilizing if the soil is good. Fertilizing peonies can be done after bloom if need, but a soil test should be done if chemical fertilizers are to be used. High nitrogen fertilizers should be avoided as it will cause excessive weak plant growth making them prone to disease organisms. Avoid planting peonies in places that have had peonies growing in them previously. Peonies utilize micronutrients in the soil which are depleted over time and planting them in soil that has previously grown peonies will produce poor plants. Diseases may also be contained in soil that previously grew peonies and this can infect new plantings.

In summation, herbaceous Peonies are outstanding, long lived plants that will likely remain long after we are gone, if some basic care is provided. We have plants on our farm that were hybridized in the 1800's and some that were grown by my Grandfather in Brandon, Wisconsin. We enjoy them as much today as he did 50+ years ago.