



PEONIES

The genus *Paeonia* is made of hardy, deer-resistant perennials that need little care and will bloom every spring for many years once established; they may not bloom for the first year or two after planting. There are 25 - 45 species of peonies, but the two most common species grown in the Inland Northwest are the herbaceous, *Paeonia lactiflora*, and the tree peony, *Paeonia suffruticosa*. In addition, there is a hybrid of these two, usually called intersectional or Itoh peonies, *Paeonia*

P. lactiflora

The most common peony species is commonly called a garden, or herbaceous, peony. It has full bushy stems that grow from thickened tuberous roots. Garden peonies grow 2-4 feet tall. The flower forms will be described with the terms, single, Japanese, bomb, anemone, semi-double or fully double. They will be produced in late May or early June in colors of white, yellow, cream, pink, rose, or deep red.

P. suffruticosa

The tree peony is a hardy, deciduous shrub with woody stems. They bloom earlier in May and can reach a foot in diameter. The flower form can be single row of petals, semi-double or fully double with multitudes of petals. The colors available include yellow, pink, white, rose, crimson, scarlet, almost black, purple and an array of color combinations. Due to the large size of the flowers, they may need some type of support.

Paeonia x itoh

A cross between the herbaceous and tree peonies is called an intersectional, often referred to as Itoh, in honor of the Japanese botanist who bred it successfully. The intersectional peony has the large flowers of the tree peonies, but the smaller plant size and herbaceous stems of the garden peony. As with the tree peony, the flowers may need some sort of support.

Site Selection

Herbaceous, intersectional, and tree peonies will do well in any good garden soil that is 12-18" deep, drains well, and has a neutral pH. Garden peonies do best in full sun. If there is not sufficient sunshine, blossoms will be few and small. Tree peonies will flourish in full sun but prefer dappled light. All varieties need protection from high winds but also need good air circulation to prevent disease like powdery mildew.

Plant Selection

When buying garden or intersectional peonies, purchase tubers with three to five eyes (pink growth buds). Tubers with few or no eyes often rot in the ground. Tubers with more than five eyes fail to produce large flowers.

Tree peonies can be purchased and planted in spring or fall. Tree peonies are propagated by a slow and difficult grafting process making them more expensive, however their hardiness, dependability and beauty make them a worthwhile expense. Many varieties are available.

Planting

The best time to plant is in the fall. Peony tubers need to be exposed to a period of cold in order to form flower buds. Peony plants purchased in the spring can be planted and will likely produce flowers if the grower allowed the plants to experience the cold period.

Garden or intersectional peony tubers: Plant the tuber with the uppermost eye no more than 2 inches below the soil surface. Deeper planting will prevent blooming. If plants are potted, dig soil to the depth of the pot and twice as wide. If the soil needs amending, do it now since peonies will likely be in place for a long time. Amending soil can cause problems with water infiltration through the soil, so only amend if needed. Potted peonies maybe be root bound and if they are, be sure to spread the roots out. Keep the crown of the plant at grade level, not higher or lower.

Replace about half the soil, water thoroughly, fill with remaining soil, press down gently, and water again. Set plants at least 3 feet apart.

Tree peonies - Prepare soil as above and amend only if needed. Plant tree peonies deep with the graft about 4-5" below the soil surface. The graft can be recognized by ridging on stem and different bark texture. Spread roots out if pot bound. Refill soil as described above with garden and Itoh peonies.

General Care

Garden and intersectional peonies require little care. Water regularly and allow soil to dry somewhat between waterings. Peonies prefer well-draining soil and will rot if the soil consistently stays wet. In fall, cut off stems at soil surface. Peonies may need winter mulch their first year but are so hardy that winter protection is not routine.

Tree peonies are also very easy care. Water regularly, especially in summer heat, and allow to dry somewhat between waterings; avoid wet soil. After flowers have faded, cut them off to encourage the plant to put more energy into growth and storage, rather than setting seed.

Tree peonies are not cut back to the ground in fall. Doing so will remove next year's flower buds. As with most woody shrubs, however, pruning may be done to maintain form and health, preferably after flowering. Tree peonies may need the protection of mulch their first winter, but do not need protection thereafter.

Dividing and Transplanting

Do not disturb peonies and let them remain in the same location for many years. Tree peonies are not divided but may be moved if necessary, using standard shrub transplanting procedures. If garden peonies must be divided, do it in the early fall. To divide, dig plants carefully, remove foliage, hose dirt from roots and cut tubers

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into sections with 3-5 eyes. Plant tubers as described above. Never divide a plant less than 3 years old, as it may restrict flowering. Garden peonies may grow for 15-20 years before needing dividing.

Diseases

Common disease, insect problems and control information for plants can be found at: [WSU Extension | Hortsense](#)

Anthrachnose is a fungal disease causing purple-red, circular to irregularly-shaped spots of foliage but elongate cankers with sunken centers on the stem. The center of both appear ashy gray except during humid conditions. During humid conditions, salmon-colored spore-bearing structures can be seen within infected tissue and are a diagnostic sign for this disease. The fungi will overwinter in the leaf litter, so thorough fall cleanup is important.

Botrytis Blight is a fungal disease that attacks stems, buds and leaves. It is first noticed in the early spring when young stalks suddenly wilt and fall over. Flower buds become infected, turn brown and become covered with spore masses. Even opening flowers may be destroyed. Remove and destroy affected plant parts as soon as they appear. Fall sanitation is particularly important. Remove and destroy all aboveground plant parts. Do not compost. If winter mulch is used, be sure to remove in early spring. Avoid overwatering and crowding plants. [Common Diseases: Botrytis blight \(Gray mold\) | Hortsense | Washington State University](#)

Leaf Spots are caused by various fungi. Cut plants back to ground level in the fall. Thorough cleanup is important. [Common Diseases: Leaf spots and blights | Hortsense | Washington State University](#)

Powdery mildew is a fungal disease that causes white mycelia to grow on the upper surfaces of leaves. It can be mitigated by proper watering techniques but not eliminated. [Common Diseases: Powdery mildew | Hortsense | Washington State University](#)

Insects

Thrips are tiny, dark, elongated insects that feed on leaves and blossoms. They cause distorted and discolored flowers and buds.

Ants - Gardeners are often concerned about the presence of large numbers of ants on their peonies. The ants are not harmful; they simply are feeding on the sweet substance secreted by the flower buds. There is no need to control them.