

TYPES OF PEONIES

There are three distinct types of peonies: tree peonies, herbaceous peonies, and “intersectional” hybrids between the two, including the famous Itoh peonies. Tree peonies are really deciduous shrubs, growing eventually to about 6 feet tall and broad. They produce huge (10-12”) single or double flowers on woody stems. Herbaceous peonies die to the ground each winter. Newly emerging spring shoots are often a gorgeous translucent red or amber. They grow into 2-4 foot clumps, with flowers that can range from 2” to about 8”. Intersectional peonies, such as the Itoh peonies, are hybrids between tree and herbaceous peonies. They combine the massive flower size of tree peonies with the more compact plant size of the herbaceous ones, and produce more flowers than either parent!

WHERE AND HOW TO PLANT

Peonies need a deep, rich, well-drained loamy soil that has been generously amended with organic matter. Full sun is best, although peonies will tolerate light shade. Pastel shades actually do better in light shade, as intense sun can fade the flowers. Space herbaceous and Itoh peony plants 2 to 3 feet apart when massing, 3 to 4 feet apart as specimens. Tree peonies need 4 to 6 feet of space. Peonies are long-lived, so prepare your area well. Mix in at least 3” of good compost and a cup of high phosphorus fertilizer such as bone meal or organic flower fertilizer into your planting area. Potted peonies should be planted at the same level they are in their container, not higher or lower. Bareroot herbaceous peonies should be planted only an inch or two below the soil surface. Bareroot tree peonies should be planted with the graft line 4-6” below the soil surface. Bareroot plants are unlikely to bloom their first (and sometimes second) season; well-grown potted plants may. As the plants become better established, their flower show will increase.

WHEN TO PLANT

Look for bareroot herbaceous peonies in the fall (September/October) and again in early spring (February/March). Bareroot tree peonies arrive in early spring. Potted peony plants, including the Itoh peonies, become available starting in late March to early April.

CARE

Peonies are easy to grow once established. In early spring, fertilize plants with a good organic flower fertilizer. Do not use a high-nitrogen fertilizer as this can result in reduced flowering. Bait for slugs and snails if necessary. Put up peony rings to support large-flowered varieties.

Water adequately during the summer dry spells. In the fall after the first frost, remove and destroy all fallen leaves. Itoh peonies should be cut to the ground at this time. Fertilize with bone meal or organic flower fertilizer, and mulch lightly with compost.

CUT BLOOMS

Peonies make unbeatable cut flowers. The large blooms make outstanding bouquets and fill any room with their sweet scent. However, one must not cut too early, too often, or too long! Avoid the temptation to cut the first blooms of a young peony. Snip off the heads when they

fade, but leave as much of the leaves as you can. These supply energy to the roots making them stronger for next year. When your plant produces an abundance of blooms, feel free to cut up to half of them. Again, leave as much of the leaves as possible. For long vase life, cut the buds when they show color and are marshmallowy to the touch.

PROBLEMS, POSSIBLE CAUSES, AND SOLUTIONS

No Buds Appear:

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| 1. | Plants are immature | Give them more time to mature! |
| 2. | Planted too deep or too shallow | If the eyes are more than 2" or less than 1 ½" below the soil surface, lift and replant in the fall. |
| 3. | Clumps too large and too old | If an older clump stops flowering, divide it, leaving at least 3 eyes on each division. |
| 4. | Moved or divided too often | If a clump is doing well, it should NOT be moved or divided. Peonies can remain in place a lifetime. Give a transplanted clump several years to adjust. |
| 5. | Too much nitrogen | Cut down on fertilizer or switch to bone meal. |
| 6. | Too much shade | Move to a sunnier location. |

Buds Appear but Flowers Do Not Develop:

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| 1. | Buds killed by late frost | Better luck next year! (Some gardens have "frost pockets"—you may want to move your plant) |
| 2. | Buds killed by disease (they usually turn black and die) | Remove infected buds and leaves. Cut dead leaves and stems to the ground. The next spring when plants are 4-6" tall spray with copper fungicide. Follow the spray directions. |
| 3. | Buds attacked by thrips (they open partially, turn brown, and fall off) | Spray with Horticultural Oil or Neem Oil. Follow the spray directions. |
| 4. | Buds waterlogged due to too much rain. | Plant singles or Japanese varieties. Try bagging your flower buds. |
| 5. | Plants undernourished | Fertilize with Rose and Flower fertilizer. |