

More than You Ever Wanted to Know about Peonies

Peonies are wonderful plants for the garden. They're easy to grow, extremely cold hardy, and live a very long time. There are three basic types of peonies. The two most common are herbaceous peonies (that die back to the ground every fall), and tree peonies (that have woody stems which do not die back to the ground). The third type is called Itoh hybrids. These are intersectional hybrids between herbaceous and tree peonies and resemble herbaceous peonies but offer yellow, yellow-blend colors and larger flowers than are available in herbaceous peonies.

Planting instructions are different for different types of peonies although all like the soil worked deeply (see below.) Herbaceous peonies and Itoh hybrids should be planted with the red, easily-identified, growth buds less than two inches below the surface of the ground. If they are planted too deeply they may grow, but will not bloom. All of the herbaceous peonies we offer are containerized and will be at the right depth if you plant them the same depth as they are in the pot.

In contrast to herbaceous and Itoh peonies, planting tree peonies deeply is actually beneficial. Tree peonies do not start readily from cuttings so they are usually propagated by grafting a tree peony twig onto an herbaceous peony root. However, tree peonies will grow into nicer plants if they grow on their own roots. To get them to form their own roots, they should be planted deeply with part of the tree peony stem and some buds *underground!* In two or three years, lots of roots will grow out of the tree peony stem. In the meantime, the herbaceous peony root sustains the plant. However once a tree peony forms its own roots, the herbaceous root becomes a detriment by absorbing more than its share of the plants energy.

We used to advise that tree peonies be dug up in the third year to remove the herbaceous peony root, but even though he's an old dog Larry continues to learn new tricks! Now we place a zip tie just above the herbaceous peony nurse root when we pot tree peonies. As the plant grows its own roots, the zip tie slowly strangles the nurse root so it does not have to be removed. (Is that slick or what?) So if you plant the tree peonies we offer at the same depth as they are in the pot, they'll be at the right depth to form their own roots without digging up later

Aside from the above planting differences, the cultural practices are similar for all types of peonies:

1. Peonies slowly develop large root systems so their planting soil should be worked deeply--up to 18 inches deep and three feet in diameter. Well-rotted manure and/or compost should be mixed into the soil at planting. Do not overdo adding organic matter to the soil when planting--it will eventually rot and the peony will sink into a hole. (Despite our innate gardening brilliance, we used to make this mistake!) Make sure all of the soil that was removed is replaced even if the peony winds up on a small mound.
2. Choose a planting site in full-to half-day sun and do not move the plant thereafter. Peonies need sun to bloom well. Transplanting will set them back resulting in fewer and smaller flowers. For the best plants and flowers, it's better to leave them alone.
3. Avoid watering peonies with overhead sprinklers. Wet foliage can contribute to disease and overhead sprinklers damage the huge flowers. Herbaceous peonies benefit from growing in a peony ring (we offer these) because the stems are often not strong enough to support the huge flowers. Tree peonies require no support.
4. Clean up the dead leaves around your peonies when they go dormant in the fall. Fungus disease can over winter on the dead leaves and infect the plant. Cut back the dormant foliage and stems on **herbaceous and Itoh hybrid** peonies to the ground. Cut back the seed heads on **tree peonies** to a good healthy out-facing bud but leave the woody stems; they will branch and give you more stems and flowers the following year.
5. Fertilize peonies sparingly (if at all) in subsequent years after planting. Do not place nitrogen-rich fertilizers within a foot of the stems or growing eyes of herbaceous peonies. It can encourage botrytis fungus. This disease is treatable, but it ruins a year's foliage and can weaken the plant. Fertilizers that are low in nitrogen and that contain phosphate (some types of rose fertilizer for example) may also be used on peonies.

