



Big Dipper Farm

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The Peony - Bush & Tree - *Paeonia*

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The ‘Queen of the Flowers’.... Beloved and treasured by gardeners since the beginning of recorded history. Peonies are classic garden plants that add timeless beauty and charm to the garden. The ancient Chinese called the tree peonies Hua Wang ‘the King of Flowers’ and bush peonies were called Hua Leang ‘the Kings Ministers’

The large, exotic, uniquely colored, and often lusciously fragrant blooms are produced in late spring. Some as large as a dinner plate! By choosing a selection of early, mid and late blooming varieties you can enjoy the finest cut flower in the world for seven full weeks in May and June. **Tip* By dipping buds in warm wax and refrigerating them, florists have found they can have cut blooms even in August.* They come in an astonishing palette of colors and the flowers dry beautifully as well so they can be enjoyed all year long.

Peonies should only be moved when dormant and fall is the best time to plant them. Planting in the spring will likely delay their blooming a season longer. Place them in the garden where they can be left permanently as Peonies do not respond well to transplanting and re-establish slowly sometimes refusing to bloom for years.

Peonies are deep rooting plants that will likely out-live you so take the time to do the most important thing you can for peonies, chose and prepare the perfect site. Full sun in northern states and part shade in the south is ideal. Protection from hard wind or driving rain prolongs flower life. Dig deep, 2 feet or so and amend your native soil with a good, rich, planting compost that will allow good drainage all year. They cannot sit in standing winter wet spots. Here in rainy Western Washington, a raised bed or mound is preferable. Add what you need to bring your native soil to near neutral pH. While neutral to slightly alkaline soil is preferred, these plants can tolerate a wide range of soil conditions nicely.

These are extremely hardy plants thriving in some of the coldest gardens in the world. Many down to zone 3!
A joy to own, but be warned, Peony-lust is a progressive condition.

Tree or Bush... What’s the difference?

Tree Peony - *Paeonia suffruticosa*

- **When planting a Tree Peony**, be sure to bury the graft union (a bulge on the main stem) **at least 4 inches underground** so the tree peony side of the graft can start growing it's own roots. Planting a graft below soil level goes against most planting rules but this is important!
- Mature height is 4-5 feet.
- Tree peonies have woody stems like a shrub. The branches do not die back to the ground in winter and should not be cut back.
- Trees bloom about two or three weeks before the bush varieties.
- Trees are slower growing than the bush peonies.
- In colder climates (zones 5 and lower) tree peonies should be well mulched for winter.

Bush, Garden or Herbaceous Peony - *Paeonia*

- **When planting Bush peonies**, plant the roots with the eyes, (the reddish growth buds) pointing up and 1-2” below soil level in the North and no more than 1” below soil in the South. If the eyes are set deeper or shallower, plants may not bloom.
- Mature height is 2-3 feet.
- These are shrubby plants that reach full height by mid-spring when they bloom. They have attractive foliage throughout the summer, get nice Fall color, and then die down to the ground after frost.
- After the show of fall color has died back, cut foliage off at ground level and remove from the garden.

General care for all Peonies:

Maintain even moisture the first summer but peonies are surprisingly drought-tolerant once established. Lay down an annual one-inch topdressing of compost or aged manure and no other fertilization is necessary. Plants do not need to be divided and can be left undisturbed for years.

If Tree Peonies become leggy, a moderate pruning in early fall can be done to shape plant and encourage additional growth on the lower part of the plant.

Remove spent flowers after blooming.

**Tip* Larger flowers may be obtained by dis-budding, removing all but the large terminal bud.*

Supports or Staking:

Large, fully double flowers usually need staking or other support because they tend to arch toward the ground in the best of weather and can be literally driven into the ground by a heavy rain. The best support is the 'grow-through' type that is laid over the plant at the beginning of the season and then lifted a little at a time as the stems come up through the grid. **Tip* Grow through supports can be made by cutting a round piece of chicken wire.* The support ends up completely hidden within the plant about half way up its height.

Possible Problems:

Remarkably free of diseases and pests, Peonies can occasionally get Botrytis blight and Phytophthora blight. Cut the affected stem off and properly dispose of it, then spray the plant with a copper fungicide or lime sulphur. To prevent disease, cut the bush varieties down almost to the ground when the foliage yellows or after the first frost and dispose of the cuttings (do not add them to a compost pile). Peonies resent disturbance, but if you must move a plant, the best time to do so is in the fall. Dig a very deep root ball.

Ants on peony buds are common and totally harmless. In spite of the myth, they are NOT required for the buds to open.

If plants do not flower, possible causes include:

- Being planted too deep or too shallow,
- Getting too much shade,
- A late spring frost killed the flower buds,
- Too much fertilizer shifting energy to foliage production,
- Botrytis blight
- The plant is too young or has been recently moved or disturbed.

Don't be surprised if there are few or no flowers the first spring after planting, especially on the tree peonies. Plants generally take a few years to establish no matter what size plant you start with. Some patience is required to give the plants time to do their thing. The rewards are more than worth it.

Warmer Climates:

Because winter chilling is required for flowering, peonies often do not perform well in the South and West in zones above 8. Early blooming and single or Japanese cultivars generally perform better in warmer climates like: Felix Crousse, Fextiva Maxima, Mons. Jules Elie, and Sarah Bernhardt. The species peony from Spain, *Paeonia coriacea* is also great for warmer climes as is the wonderful 'Molly-the-Witch' *Paeonia mlokosewitschii*. To encourage flowering, plant on a northern exposure and do not mulch in the winter. Position them where they'll get midday shade. I know some Western gardeners that cover their peonies with ice for a full month in the winter to give them the chill hours they need to bloom. Well worth it for this glorious flower.

Follow these basic planting and care rules and your Peony will be the jewel of your landscape and bring you beauty and joy for decades to come.