

# Peonies

Peonies are one of the best known and most loved perennials. It seems everyone's Grandmother had at least one in their yard. If you follow the specific instructions to plant Peonies, they will reward you by being one of the easiest perennials to care for. They will flower reliably every spring and need very little special care. Peonies thrive in Montana's cold winters and can be grown in nearly any part of the state.



The most commonly sold Peonies are the Chinese types or *Paeonia lactiflora*. These are typically classified as late spring blooming and include the following flower types. Peonies come in red, pink and white. Recently purple and yellow

varieties have come onto the market but they are still very new, hard to find and very expensive.

**Single:** Five or more petals around a center of prominent and typically yellow, pollen bearing stamens.

**Japanese:** Five or more petals arranged around a center made up on non-pollen bearing stamens. Also referred to as 'anemone flowered' when the stamens are narrow petal like forms called petaloids.

**Semi-double:** Five or more outer petals arranged around the center consisting of broad petals and pollen bearing stamens. There may be a distinct ring of stamens or they may be in rings in the petals but they are always clearly visible and prominent.

**Double:** There are five or more petals but the

stamens have been completely transformed into petals and are not normally distinguishable from the petals. The majority of gardeners are most familiar with this form.

Peonies have very specific needs when they are planted. They can be purchased as potted perennials or bareroot tubers. Select firm tubers that show no signs of rot. When buying potted plants, pick ones that are showing at least 2 or more stems. Fall is generally considered the best time for planting but Peonies can be planted all spring and summer too.

Choose a site with good sun. They do best in full sun but can tolerate up to medium shade. Good drainage is important because Peonies cannot tolerate wet sites. Since Peonies are so long lived, do a very good job preparing the soil. Dig a generous hole, 2' by 2' and amend the soil generously with compost. The Peonies will use that deep good soil for many years to come.

Peonies are a tuberous root with 'eyes' (think of the 'eyes' on a potato). It is very important for the eyes be exactly 2" below the soil surface. If you plant Peonies too deep, they are unlikely to flower. If you plant them too shallow, they may be pushed out of the ground by frost heave. They are truly fussy about planting depth.

Starting the second year after planting, fertilize your Peonies every spring with a low nitrogen fertilizer such as bonemeal (3-15-0). Do not use high nitrogen formulas. Over fertilizing can lead to poor flower production. A yearly application of compost is also helpful to keep the soil fertile. Top dress around the plants with about 2" of compost before the stems emerge. They will come up

through it. During the growing season, keep Peonies well watered.

When they become established clumps, they usually need support cages for their heavy flowers. Peony cages are sold for this purpose. We advise putting the cage on as soon as you see shoots emerging in spring; it can be difficult to do when the plant is very big. Keep an eye on the growth, guiding new stems into the encircling wires of the cage. The plant will hide the cage in no time. When the flowers finish, deadhead the plant by cutting out all stems that had flowers. The other foliage needs to remain and will turn a reddish orange for fall color. After a few hard frosts, cut all the stems to the ground.

Once Peonies are planted, it may take up to three years to produce flowers and a few more years after that to become large clumps. They do not like being planted and take some time to recover from it. Therefore, it is not advisable to divide Peonies very often, if at all. It is occasionally recommended to divide very old Peony clumps if they have stopped producing flowers. However, there are other reasons why a Peony can fail to flower. The American Peony Society provides this list of possible problems.

*No buds appear:*

1. Plants too young. Allow them to mature.
2. Planted too deep or too shallow. If you suspect this, dig them up in fall and replant, making sure the eyes are exactly 2" below the soil surface.
3. Clumps too large and old. If the plant has been in 10 or more years, this is possible although not likely. Divide in fall; be sure each replanted root has at least 3-5 eyes.
4. Moved or divided too often. Patience, patience, they will reward you.
5. Too much nitrogen. Cut down on fertilizing or change the formula you use.
6. Too much shade. Move to a sunnier location.

*Buds appear but flowers do not develop:*

1. Buds killed by late frost. In some areas, you may need to be attentive to weather forecasts and provide protection to tender buds.
2. Buds killed by disease. They turn black and die. Spray fungicide to keep fungus from killing entire plant. Do a thorough job of fall cleanup.
3. Buds attacked by thrips. They open partially, turn brown and fall off. Spray with a pyrethrum based spray followed within 24 hours with a contact/ systemic kill pesticide.
4. Buds waterlogged due to too much rain or irrigation. Decrease irrigation or you may have to bag buds to protect them from rain in very bad years.
5. Plants undernourished. They need to be fertilized, use a low nitrogen formula or top dress with compost in early spring.
6. Excessively hot weather. Too much heat in spring can cause problems but there is not much that can be done for it.
7. It is a myth that Peonies need to attract ants in order for their buds to open. While ants that are already around will feed on Peony sap, they are neither harmful nor beneficial to the plant.

Tree Peonies are another form of peonies; they are not true trees but rather woody-stemmed shrubs with peony flowers. They are relatively hardy but do prefer a site sheltered from harsh winter wind. They typically reach 3' high and 2' wide. The color selection is greater but is still mainly red to pink to white. Yellow is also available although the color is somewhat muddy. Tree Peonies have the same cultural requirements as perennial Peonies meaning good sun, adequate water and well prepared soil.

Other species of Peonies are sometimes available and the Fern Leaf Peony is regularly offered at Plant Land. *Paeonia tenuifolia* 'Plena' has lobed, fern like leaves and a dark red double flower that appears in spring. It is a special addition to the garden and its price reflects its rarity. It too has the same cultural requirements as perennial Peonies.