

Peonies: Pros and Cons

Is it pennies, pineys, pea-o'nees, or pea'-o-nees? Depending on what part of the U.S. you are from, the pronunciation may vary. But one thing everyone can agree on is that peonies are beautiful, hardy, durable perennial plants with large fragrant flowers. Peony history goes back over 2500 years to their cultivation in China. Peony breeding continues today with over 30 species and hundreds of cultivars and hybrids available. Peonies are long-lived plants surviving a hundred years or more and can be a welcome addition to flowerbeds even when not in bloom. The blossom colors include white, yellow, pink, coral, red and maroon.

Dividing or planting bareroot plants

Garden peonies prefer full sun to flower and thrive and well-drained soil rich in organic material. Fall is the best time to plant. If standing water is present, the roots may rot. Peonies do not require regular division for successful blooming the way other perennials (such as bearded iris) need dividing. Divisions can be done to increase the planting area or if the plants are growing poorly. This seems to be more successful if done in the fall (mid-September through October, rather than spring) so that the roots can get established before the ground freezes. Note that peonies resent transplanting and may not do well. Newly planted peonies take 1-3 years to fully mature and bloom completely, so don't be too disappointed if you get few blooms the first year. After all, you may have it for 50 years or more!

Fall Care

Before digging, cut back the old tops and discard. Do not put in a compost bin as they may transmit disease. Lift plants with as much soil around the roots as possible. With a sharp knife, carefully separate the clump of roots, leaving at least 3-5 buds or "eyes" on each section. The "eyes" are actually the shoots for next season. Reset the root in its new location with the buds no more than 1 to 2 inches below the soil, facing up. If the buds are placed deeper, the plant will not flower but, rather, produce only foliage. Place the root deeper than the "eyes", positioned at the level where it was previously growing. Plants should be placed about 2-1/2 to 3 feet apart to allow for air circulation around them. Use about 2 inches of mulch around the plant. Because the blossoms are heavy and the stems are rather weak, it may be wise to stake the plant when it is put in the ground with a 3-leg round wire support.

When peonies are finished flowering next spring, cut off the flower head or seed pods, so that the plant's energy can go to the root to be stored for next year's flower production rather than making seeds. Allow as much foliage as possible to remain to help store energy as well, but stems can be cut back to form a rounded bushy plant. Then, in the fall after the tops are frost-killed, trim the tops back almost to the ground, leaving only enough showing to mark their spot

showing above the mulch. This will be your marker so that you do not accidentally disturb the plant during your early spring cleanup.

Dealing with Disease

Some peonies can be plagued with fungal diseases although newer hybrids may be more resistant. The fungus *botrytis* can attack the flower buds which turn brown and don't open. Another fungal disease is peony measles. It can attack any part of the plant but is often noticed in late summer as the leaves develop red blotches until the leaves are unsightly. Generally, neither of these diseases are life-threatening to the plant. Sanitation can help immensely to lessen disease. Remove and discard infected leaves in late fall or early spring. Overhead watering from a sprinkler system may contribute to the problem if the leaves do not have time to dry before nightfall.

Despite what your granny told you, ants do not help or hurt the peonies. They are just attracted to the nectar.

Resources

To help with your selection of a new peony plant, the American Peony Society lists its award winners and a gallery of photos at americanpeonysociety.org.