

Peony

Peonies are one of our most beloved perennials, giving us magnificent blossoms of white, soft pastels, or deepest red in spring and early summer, with a dividend of handsome, compound leaves that remain attractive throughout the season.

Peonies are classified in two main groups: the well-known herbaceous kinds discussed here, which die completely to ground in winter, and the less common tree peonies, a shrublike form with persistent woody stems.

Peonies bloom best in regions with cold winters (zones 3-7) Plant peonies in spring, summer or fall. Dig and divide in September or before April 1st.

1. **Select a site:**

Choose a site with well-drained soil away from the competing roots of trees and shrubs. It is also wise to avoid very windy areas, since peony stems are vulnerable to breakage when heavy with buds and flowers. Give each plant an area about 3 feet in diameter. A site in full sun is best, with at least six hours of sun each day.

2. **Prepare the soil:**

Peonies bloom most prolifically if left to grow undisturbed in the same location for many years, so planting in well-prepared and enriched soil is important. Dig a planting hole about 2 feet across and 18 inches deep. Mix several shovels of compost or well rotted manure (fresh manure harms the roots) into the bottom of the hole. Fill the hole halfway with topsoil mixed with more compost and a cup of bonemeal. If your soil is acidic, also mix in about 1 cup of ground limestone. Peonies like a pH between 6 and 7.

3. **Plant The Peony:**

A bare-root peony division is a section of rooted crown with, ideally, three to five firm, dark red growth buds called eyes. Each bud gives rise to a stem in the spring. Divisions with fewer eyes will grow but are slower to form a good-size, blooming plant.

4. **Care for the Plant:**

Water the plant in with a gentle stream from a hose. Then surround it with a light bark mulch, to help reduce competition from weeds. In cold-winter climates, mulching also helps prevent alternate freezing and thawing of the soil and subsequent heaving of the young plant. In mild-winter regions, mulch helps keep the summer soil temperature down and reduces water loss from evaporation.

Don't expect full bloom the first year or so after planting a peony. By the third year, however, it should reach top form and blossom gloriously for many years.