

Paeonia sp. - Peony

Common Name(s): Peony

Categories: Perennials

Season: Spring to early summer

Height/Size: 36 inches

Flower Color: Red, pink, white, pastels

Hardiness: Zones 3-7

Foliage: Mid to dark green, sometimes silver-bluish or gray-green leaves.

Flower: Saucer, cup, or bowl shaped in one of the following forms - single, semi-double, double, or Japanese.

Site/Sun: Well-drained, deep, slightly acidic soil; Full sun to partial shade

Propagation: Division in late summer, plant in the fall

North Carolina Regions: Mountains and Piedmont

Origins: Non-Native; Typically found in rocky places, meadows, & scrubs in East Asia (China) and Europe (Siberia).

Comments: In 1957, Indiana General Assembly passed a law to make the peony the state flower of Indiana, a title which it holds to this day. The peony is also a traditional floral symbol of China and is frequently used in traditional medicine of Korea, China, and Japan.



Paeonia sp. 'Pillow Talk'
Double Flower



Paeonia sp. 'Fairy Princess'
Japanese Form



Paeonia sp. 'Miss America'
Semi-Double Flower

Gardeners Plant of the Month - November 2017

When, Where, and How to Plant

Plant and grow peonies in a location with fertile, well drained soil and full sun. Although they can manage with partial shade, they bloom best in a sunny spot. Choose your location wisely and add any soil amendments prior to planting, as peonies do not respond well to transplanting. Peonies are usually sold and propagated as bare-root tubers, however, you can sow seeds in containers. Be prepared though, as seeds may take 2-3 years to germinate. Peonies are best planted in the fall, so divide or purchase plants in the late summer and plant them by the end of October. If you MUST move an established plant, the fall is also the time to do so. Peonies should be settled into place before the first hard frost.

Dig a generous-sized hole and add any soil amendments, fertilizers, or organic matter to the base of the hole at planting. Set the root tuber so that the new growths (called 'eyes') face upward, and the roots are no more than two inches below the soil surface. Don't plant too deep! If needed backfill the hole until the desired level is reached. Space plants three to four feet apart for good air circulation and to discourage fungal diseases in the future.

Companion Planting and Design

Peonies grow well in the North Carolina mountains and cooler piedmont, but sometimes languish in warmer areas like the coastal plains due to higher temperatures. Chilling during the winter is required for proper bud formation. So, depending on your area, you may want to select "low chill" cultivars, such as 'Edulis Superba', 'Felix Crousse', or 'Sarah Bernhardt' planted on cool, north facing slopes.

Peonies bloom with columbines, *Baptisia sp.* (False Indigos), and *Veronica sp.* (Speedwells), and combine well with irises and roses. Try planting white peonies with yellow irises and blue forget-me-nots or set off pink peonies with purple catmint, Russian sage, or violets.

Care/Growing Tips

Peonies thrive on benign neglect, so spare the fertilizer. If soil was well worked at planting that should be enough. If your soil is poor, the time to apply fertilizer is early summer, after the peonies have bloomed and you have deadheaded. Fertilize only every few years. Deadhead peony blossoms by cutting to a strong leaf axil so the stem does not stick out of the foliage. Prune foliage to the ground in the fall to avoid any overwintering disease. Herbaceous peonies will die back to ground level each autumn with their stems reappearing the following spring. Tree peonies, however, produce permanent woody stems that will lose their leaves in winter, but remain intact above ground level.

Don't smother peonies with mulch. If temperatures are severe the first winter after planting you can mulch VERY loosely cover with pine needles or shredded bark. Remove mulch in the spring.

Bloom Period and Season Color

Blooming late spring and early summer, peonies are known for their large, bright, and bold colored flowers. Bloom color ranges from white and pastels to dark pinks and reds, and are often very fragrant. You may have noticed that peonies tend to attract ants to the flower buds. This is due to the nectar that forms on the outside of the flower buds, and has no bearing on the peonies' pollination or growth. The ants are beneficial as they eat other insect pests, and spraying is not recommended.