



Paeonia perfection...is it a specific form, function, scent, or color that makes it so? Is it a beautifully healthy plant specimen? Or is the perfection in the memories we hold or hope to make in our gardens? It is probably a combination of all of them that will make a perfect peony. But nuts and bolts – what is a peony, where did it come from, and what conditions create the best environment to raise long lived and loved peonies?

Paeonia is the scientific name (pronounced pay-on' ee-a) for the genera we commonly call the peony. As part of the Ranunculaceae family, it is in good company – *Anemone* (windflower), *Thalictrum* (meadow rue), and *Ranunculus* (buttercup) to name a few of the relatives. The two main types are herbaceous and tree peonies. The difference – herbaceous will die back to the ground every year, growing new stems from the soil level up. Tree peonies have woody stems that lose the foliage each fall, but maintain stem structure – performing and requiring the same type of care as any other woody deciduous shrub. Remarkably, both the herbaceous and tree species are dependable flowering plants for our cold climate. In fact, they don't grow well, if at all, in the warmest of our southern states - Birmingham, AL is reported to be as far south as the most heat tolerant will survive. These cold weather lovers like good, loose, healthy soil that is well prepared, high in organic content, and well drained. For both of these species, wet feet and compacted soils are sure ways to kill them off.

Both the tree and herbaceous peonies have a long history. The first recorded peony reference is in Chinese literature during the 6th century. The beauty of the flowers has been much noted through word and illustrations in many cultures. The roots were believed to possess curative powers and were used in a medicinal capacity for many centuries. But it was mainly the beauty of the flowers that enticed Europeans to import Chinese peonies during the 18th century. Unfortunately, American gardens were not exposed to the peony until the 19th century. But, whatever the history or the parentage of the many herbaceous or tree peonies available today the beautiful blooms provide delight in an array of forms. The flower forms are formally classified as single, Japanese, semi-double, double, and bomb. All of them have a beauty that can be subtle and delicate - or in your face bold and beautiful. Some are scented, others – not so much. The colors range from white to cream, yellow, pink, red, and magenta to a purple hue. The yellows were, historically, the most elusive, but have really made a wonderful showing, thanks to dedicated plant hunters and breeders.

When planning to start or increase your herbaceous peony planting – choose a site with full sun, and good, loose, healthy and well drained soil. The area should be well prepared to a depth of about two feet, adding organic material if needed. As with any planting area, allowing the soil to settle somewhat will keep those plant roots where you put them. Place the peony root section with the eyes two inches below the soil level, allowing about three to four feet between roots or other plant material. In warmer climates, only an inch depth is needed to provide adequate cover and maximum exposure to cold. Yes – you read right – maximum exposure to cold. Peonies do best when the winters are cold. (Those warm winters may be great for our heating bills, but wreak havoc with the production of peony blooms.) The best time to plant bare root peonies is in the fall before the ground freezes solid. The second best time is early in March just after the ground thaws enough to get them in. When purchased from reputable growers, peony roots will be substantial, often about two years old, and will be shipped at a time that is best for planting. It is always a good idea to give new herbaceous peonies a bit of help the first winter with some mulch cover. This will protect planted areas from heaving and throwing the roots to the soil surface. But once they take hold, no winter mulch is needed. Peonies are easy when happy and they certainly don't need much. When placed into a well composted and healthy soil, they will go for many years without needing any additional fertilizer. In fact, excessive or heavy nitrogen feeding will promote lots of fast growth foliage (which can be weaker in structure) at the expense of blooms. Spring care is minimal. If the plant form tends to be tall with ponderous flowers, you may want to provide some structural support. A flower cage, placed over the plant as it emerges, will allow the peony stems to grow into and through it, providing the support necessary to prevent breakage. If large blooms are a goal, nipping side or secondary buds as they develop will eliminate competition for nutrients, concentrating all of the food to fewer blooms. Fall care is simple – when the stems and foliage turn brown, cut them back to ground level and dispose of them off site. A pleasant surprise of first year flowering may happen with herbaceous peonies – but don't be disappointed if it takes more than that, it's definitely worth the wait.

Tree peonies are not commonly found in home landscapes. They can be a bit trickier to place and plant, they take longer to flower, and do require more intense pruning. But if placed in a well prepared site with an eye toward permanence, expect a very long and healthy tree peony life. The best soil is healthy, well prepared, well drained,

and high in organic matter. A good planting site will have partial sun – a bit of afternoon shading is best – with a moderate amount of protection from severe winds. Tree peonies are generally grafted onto root stock, and will need to be planted with the graft union at a depth well under ground for protection. (Most will come as container plants, making depth determination really easy - just plant them at the same depth as they were in the container.) Planting deep will create the best situation for that flowering portion to develop and send out strong roots that will eventually supplant the supporting root stock. Winter care should include a mulching of four to five inches of good loose material to protect the tender base of the plant. Expect tree peonies to reach a height anywhere between three to eight feet in about ten years. When pruning these deciduous shrubs late in the winter season, keep mature form and size in mind.

Throughout the growing season, watch for insect and disease issues, treating as needed. Botrytis (gray mold) is one of the main health problems faced by peonies. If your plants are beset by this disease, good cultural care throughout the season, immediate removal of infected material, and disinfecting tools will often be enough to manage the problem. If not, there are relatively safe products on the market, that when used according to directions and at appropriate times, are very effective. Japanese beetles can be a serious issue for many of our garden plants that they love to munch on. Peonies are no different. Treat them the same as any other plant when using preventative or reactive treatments. Other issues to consider - root rot, leaf spot, ants, rose chafers, nematodes, and potassium deficiency. None of which are serious threats on a regular basis.

I have fond memories of peonies in the yard where I grew up. Flicking the flower buds to see how far the ants would fly as they fervently tried to get at the flowers. And then there was the wait for a storm to pass – how many stalks would bend over? That was the best - we were allowed to cut the bent peonies and bring their blooming scent into the house. But enough of that – what is a good peony? It is in the eye of the beholder, to be sure. Often though, gardeners are looking for peonies that will stand up to whatever nature throws at them. Strong stems to withstand the early summer storms, flowers that waft a beautiful heady fragrance, every color in the rainbow that, of course, doesn't fade, perfect foliage that succumbs to no disease or insect. Passionate breeders, caring nurserymen, adventurous plant hunters – all continue to look for that elusive perfect peony. Yet even in the imperfections there is beauty – so I'll just enjoy what they've given us thus far as I wait in anticipation.