



Growing Garden Peonies

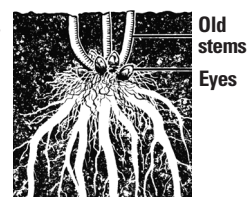
The garden peony is a popular, long-lived perennial that provides abundant flowers in spring and attractive foliage throughout the growing season. If given a good site and proper care, an established peony will flower for many years. Plantings as old as 100 years have been recorded. Peonies are approximately 3 feet tall and are as wide as they are tall. They bear 3- to 6-inch diameter, fragrant flowers in May or June. Flower colors are white, cream, yellow (rare), pink, rose, lavender, and red. Garden peonies are classified into 5 types based on flower form: single, semi-double, double, Japanese, and anemone.

Double-flowered peonies are the most popular. Their stamens do not bear pollen and resemble the wide outer row of petals. Single-flowered peonies have one row of petals surrounding a cluster of yellow stamens. Semidoubles have multiple rows of petals surrounding a cluster of yellow stamens. Japanese peonies have 5 or more large petals surrounding stamens that bear no pollen. Anemones are similar except the stamens are wider and more petal-like.

The best time to plant and divide peonies in Iowa is late August and September. Planting later may not allow enough time for the plants to become established before winter. Plant peonies in a sunny, well-drained site. Do not plant peonies near trees or large shrubs. The shade cast by the trees and shrubs, together with the competition for water and nutrients, will discourage plant growth and flowering. Wet sites promote root rot and frost heaving that may damage and kill peony plants. Peonies should be spaced about 3 to 4 feet apart.

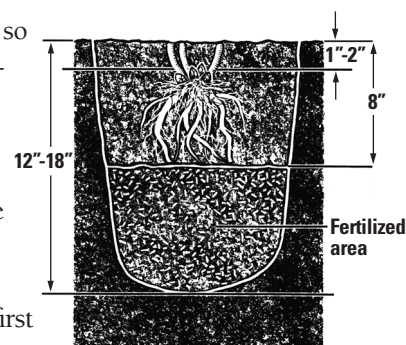
Prepare the site by digging a hole 1 to 1½ feet deep and 1 to 2 feet across. Remove the soil from the hole and break up any large clods. Incorporate compost or peat moss into the soil if more organic matter is needed. Add ¼ cup of 5-10-5 fertilizer to half of the soil and place this soil in the bottom of the hole.

When dividing peonies, cut the stems near ground level. Carefully dig up plants and shake gently to remove loose soil from the root system. Divide the clump into sections making sure that each section has at least 3 to 5 eyes (buds) and a portion of the root system. Divisions with fewer than 3 eyes may take 3 to 5 years to produce flowers.



A 3- to 5-eye peony division

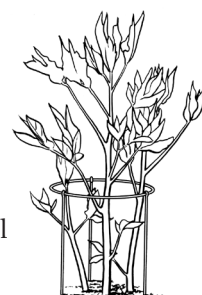
Position the peony plant so that the eyes are approximately 1 to 2 inches below the soil surface. Planting too deeply will inhibit flowering. Fill the hole with soil and water thoroughly. Water on a regular basis during the first fall and spring after planting.



Proper planting of peony division

Mulch newly planted peonies with 2 to 3 inches of straw, pine needles, or bark mulch in late fall. Mulching will prevent repeated freezing and thawing of soil that may heave and damage young plants. Remove the mulch as growth resumes in spring. Take care when removing the mulch because the new shoots will be brittle. Do not replace the mulch if a late spring freeze is forecast; peony shoots are cold resistant.

Peonies benefit from a support system of wire stakes and rings to help prevent the stems from flopping over when laden with flowers. Installing the support system when the shoots are small in spring helps prevent mechanical damage to the new shoots.



Staking and ring support for a young peony plant

Peonies may not bloom the first spring. In fact, it may be advisable to remove any flower buds that form so the plant may maximize leaf and root growth in its first growing season. While the plant may produce only a few blooms by the second year, flower numbers should increase rapidly by the third and fourth years. Once completely established, full flower production should continue for many years. Remove flowers as they wither and die. If spent flowers are allowed to remain on the plant, fruits develop that divert some of the plant's energy. To achieve the best flower display, peony plants need to conserve as much energy as possible.

Ants are frequently associated with peony flowers. They neither help nor hinder flowering. Ants are attracted to the sweet nectar produced by the peony buds and flowers.

Fertilize plants in early spring when growth is 12 inches tall and again immediately after flowering. Lightly cultivate ¼ cup of 5-10-5 fertilizer into the soil around the crown of the plant and water in. Avoid getting fertilizer within 6 to 12 inches of the crown. Peony crowns and young shoots are very susceptible to fertilizer burn.

Cultivate around plants to control weeds and break soil crusts that may slow water penetration to the roots. Do not cultivate deeper than 2 to 3 inches to avoid damaging the root system. Use extra care and shallow cultivation close to the crown.

Water peonies when weather is dry. This is especially important during bud formation and flowering. Buds may not develop fully and open if plants remain dry. Water by thoroughly soaking the soil to a depth of 12 to 18 inches.

After a hard freeze in the fall, cut the foliage at ground level and discard plant debris. Removing the foliage from the site reduces the population of plant pathogens in the area and the severity of disease problems the following year.

Many gardeners ask, "Why do my peonies fail to bloom?"

Here are the most common reasons:

- Plants are too small (have fewer than three eyes).
- Plants are planted too deep.
- Plants have too much competition from surrounding trees and shrubs.
- Plants have too much shade, which encourages tall, leafy plants and no blooms.
- Plants were given too much nitrogen fertilizer, which encourages foliage not flowers.
- Plants lack nutrients so plants are weak and small.



Additional types of peonies

While garden peonies are the most popular, other types of peonies also can be successfully grown in Iowa.

The **fernleaf peony** (*Paeonia tenuifolia*) has finely divided foliage and produces single, dark red flowers. They are one of the earliest peonies to bloom in spring. Plants commonly grow 15 to 18 inches tall. The foliage dies back by midsummer. 'Rubra Plena' has double, dark red flowers. Care guidelines for fernleaf peonies are the same as for garden peonies.

Tree peonies are medium-sized shrubs that seldom grow more than 4 to 5 feet tall. Unlike garden peonies, tree peonies have woody stems that do not die back in the fall. Flowers may be single, semi-double, or double and are commonly 6 to 8 inches wide. The most common flower colors include white, pink, and red; however, they also are available in yellow, purple, and green. Tree peonies grow rather slowly and often take 4 or more years to bloom well. Tree peonies are susceptible to dieback in severe winters. Covering the base of the shrubs with several inches of straw or pine needles in late fall should prevent extensive damage.

Intersectional hybrids are produced by crossing herbaceous (garden) peonies with tree peonies. These hybrids possess the hardiness of herbaceous peonies and the attractive flowers and foliage of the tree peonies. Intersectional hybrids are available in many flower colors but yellow is the most common color. The stems of intersectional hybrids die back to the ground in fall. Care guidelines are the same as for garden peonies.

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