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Peonies and Peony Care

Peonies are rated among the most beautiful of all flowering plants, with magnificent blossoms on hardy, easy-care plants. The large, showy and long-lasting blooms come in many forms and colors. Many varieties are fragrant, and are great for cutting. Peonies are truly the "King of Flowers."

In general, the peony bloom season starts in early spring, around the time that the tulips open, and extends for 6-8 weeks. Plant height varies from 6" for the dwarf forms, to a very tall 48", although most range between 24" and 36" in height.

Selecting a peony can be more difficult than you might think. There are many flower forms, or shapes, besides the double blossoms that we often think of when we think of peonies. Here are some helpful definitions:

- **Single:** Five or more large guard petals around a center of pollen-bearing stamens. The wild-type or species peonies fall into this category. Some mature plants bear flowers of up to 12" in diameter.
- **Japanese:** Five or more outer petals with a center of anther-bearing stamens. Flowers are more unique than the standard double, and the plant usually has a larger number of blossoms.
- **Anemone:** Five or more petals and a center of stamens that are transformed into small, narrow petals called petalodes. Some anemone types may mature into a bomb-type peony.
- **Semi-Double:** These flowers never become full doubles, and always have a number of broad petals intermixed with the stamens. The center is always a prominent, open, feature.
- **Bomb:** Stamens are transformed into substantial petals. The flower looks like a globe sitting on a dish.
- **Double:** This is what most people think of as a peony flower – packed with petals, with little or no stamens showing. "Full doubles" have no stamens showing, although some doubles have a ring of thinner petals around the center (called a "collar").

Planting Instructions

Peonies are easy to grow, and with a little effort you will be rewarded with many years of blooms. Potted peonies can be planted any time of the year.

Soil: Peonies will grow in any good garden soil. Sandy soil results in peonies with more foliage and fewer blooms; clay soil results in slower growth but better blooms. Prepare your soil to a depth of 1-2' (the deeper the better). Add a good low-nitrogen fertilizer (such as bulb food or bone meal), and mix it in with the

deepest soil. If you add manure, make sure it is well-rotted, and does not come in contact with the plants roots or crown.

Location: Chose a sunny, well-drained spot. Your peony can tolerate some shade, but should have sun for at least half the day. Do not plant too close to large trees or shrubs, as their nutrient- and moisture-robbing roots will inhibit your peony's performance. They need good air circulation - leave 36-48" between peonies so they can mature into beautiful specimens.

Planting: Dig a hole just deep enough so that the ground level equals the top of the soil in the pot. It is crucial for the eyes (or sprouts) of your peony to be only 1-2" below ground level. Any deeper, and your peony may not bloom properly. Compact the soil in the bottom of the hole so it does not settle and cause the peony to drop too low. Water it in well.

Ongoing Care

Fertilizing: A good garden soil, properly prepared (see above) may need very little fertilization for years. Avoid high nitrogen fertilizers, unless you want long stems and few flowers! Try adding about one-half cup of bulb fertilizer or one cup of bone meal in the fall. Bulb fertilizer or a balanced (8-8-8) fertilizer in the early spring can also be sparingly applied if you REALLY think your peony needs it.

Watering: Peonies need adequate moisture from initial spring growth through the blooming season, and again in late August-early September, when the plant forms the "eyes" that will become the next year's flowers. Nature provides much of the needed moisture, but you should supplement with a thorough watering during dry periods.

Fall Clean-up: On a nice mid-September afternoon, cut all stems off at ground level (discard them in the trash or burn them). This will go a long way toward preventing future disease problems...

Disease: Botrytis can be a problem here in the Northwest, caused by high humidity and poor airflow around the plants. Cut off any affected leaves or stems and burn them or discard them in the trash. Do NOT compost diseased plant material! If good plant hygiene practices do not take care of the problem, ask us for organic or chemical treatment options.

Winter Mulching: Not generally recommended in the Northwest. If you apply bark, or other decorative mulch, at ANY time of the year, keep it at least 6" away from all peony stems.

Other Do's & Don'ts

DON'T cut more than one-third of your foliage back when cutting flowers, as the plant needs the foliage to store food after it blooms, for next year's growth.

DON'T transplant a peony during the growing season unless ABSOLUTELY NECESSARY. Divide and transplant in late fall.

DON'T plant a peony where one has previously grown, unless you replace the soil to a depth of 3 feet.

DO be patient with your peony for a few years, as it can take that long to build up enough stored energy to produce beautiful, mature blossoms.

DO enjoy your peony's magnificent beauty for years to come!