

Garden Center Guides



Peonies

Herbaceous peonies are a favorite for Kansas gardens. Colorful flowers are born on bushes of deep green leaves in May and June. The fragrant flowers may be single, semi-double, double, or

Anemone, which have broad outer petals surrounding a mound of shorter central petals.

Peonies grow from underground crowns with bud eyes. The root network develops in the fall before the ground freezes. Peonies need approximately six weeks of freezing temperatures to produce new shoots in the spring. The eyes emerge in the spring and grow rapidly to complete terminal growth by the end of May. The plants remain after blooming to store reserves for the next year's growth.

Care

Peony foliage can be cut back at the end of August and plants divided or moved from September until the ground freezes. Peonies rarely need dividing, but if necessary, cut the foliage to the ground and lift the crown with a potato fork, digging around and under the plant. Wash off the excess soil and use a sharp, sterile knife to cut the fleshy root. Each division needs three to five strong bud eyes. Trim the roots to 4 to 6 inches and reset the plant. It will take up to three years for the plant to establish and return to full size. The earlier the crown is set, the more time the plant has to establish its root system before winter.

Plant the crown so that the bud eye is barely below the soil surface, no more than 1 inch deep. Firm the soil and add water at planting time to prevent the soil from settling after planting and burying the eyes too deep. Planting the crown too deep will prevent flowering. Crowns may be planted in the fall or purchased in containers in the spring. Peonies should be spaced 3 to 4 feet apart, allowing plenty of room for growth. This long-lived plant does best when

left undisturbed in the garden. Peonies prefer full sun away from competition. The soil bed for peony crowns should be deep and fertile with plenty of organic matter. Planting in groups adds mass to the planting, making for a more dynamic flower display.

Watering and fertilizing is most critical during spring growth and flowering, and again in the fall when new roots establish. Water the plants slowly and deeply for penetration into the root zone. Feed peonies twice a year in the spring and fall with a 1-1-1 ratio fertilizer. Take care not to put fertilizer directly on the plant crown as it may burn the eyes. Band the fertilizer around the crown 8 inches away and extend the fertilizer up to 18 inches from the center. A soil test is recommended before fertilizing to determine the specific soil needs of the garden. Continual application of balanced fertilizers may cause a build up of phosphorus and potassium in the soil.

Common Concerns

Contrary to old gardening stories, ants do not feed on peonies, nor is their presence required for blooming. Ants are commonly found on peony blooms because they are attracted to the sweet excretion emitted when the sepals begin to separate.

If peonies fail to flower, the problem could be that the bud eye is planted too deep, or decaying organic matter has accumulated over the years, burying the bud eye below the recommended depth. Peonies like full sun, and if the location is too shaded, it will not bloom. Old age of the plant also can cause blooming to dwindle.

A common disease of peonies is peony wilt, a fungal disease that lies dormant in the soil. During periods of cool or prolonged wet weather, the disease appears as gray mold on the stems or brown/black rot at the stem base. The affected stems should be removed and commercial fungicide applied. Red spots or measles is another disease that causes small, dark red, circular spots on the leaves, eventually merging to

form purple blotches on the lower leaf surface. Botrytis is a fungal disease that affects the flower, causing dark distorted flower buds that will not open properly.

Harvest

The peony flower is a favorite on Memorial Day and should be cut when the buds show color and petals are beginning to separate. Cut flowers in the morning when the plant tissue is cool and turgid. Cut the stems long but leave at least two leaves on the plant below the cut. Allow the flowers to set out 20 minutes before recutting the stem and putting into water. This process will hold the peonies in tight bud for Memorial Day.

Varieties

Some suggested varieties of peonies for Kansas are 'Dr. Felix Crousse', a ruby red double; 'Festiva Maxima', a large, fragrant double white; 'James R. Mann', a double rose-pink peony often streaked with crimson in the center; 'Kansas', one of the best red double peonies; and 'Red Anemone', a single-bloom red peony with lacy red flowers.

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