

Welcome to the World of Peonies

By Judy Wilmarth

Following are some suggestions and information that may be helpful and beneficial when growing peonies in south central Alaska. Keep in mind that most peonies will not mature as quickly or vigorously in Alaska as they may in the more central parts of the U.S.

Caring for Herbaceous Peony Plants in the Fall: Peonies naturally begin putting on new roots during September and October prior to going dormant for the winter. Digging & dividing at this time of year creates the least amount of stress on the plants, and gives them a period to adjust to their new setting. All of the current year stems will completely dieback, never to return and new stems will emerge the following spring. Thus there is a constant renewal process of new eyes being formed usually at the stem base of the current years growth, or in some instances, actually on the underground portion of some stems. In an effort to protect these eyes, (next years new growth), it is better to cut the stems to 2-3" above the ground, rather than jerking or pulling the stems away from the crown material. If the crown (woody material that supports the stems) of the peony has become exposed, cover with two inches of good soil & moisten.

Preparing the Planting Site/ Amendments & Proper Drainage:

Whether preparing the planting area well in advance of planting, or several days before planting, the basic guidelines apply. Providing good to excellent drainage is essential. Peonies will not thrive in areas that are constantly wet. Low areas where water may settle during a short winter thaw or after a week of rain, and areas located directly under an overhang should be avoided. Dig the soil well and while doing so, look closely at the soil's structure. If the soil is very sandy, incorporate some compost, loam or topsoil or a combination of each. If the soil is hard pan, clay or rocky, remove it and replace with a growing medium to include leaf mold, topsoil and compost. Fertile soil with a ph of 6- 7 is recommended. Apply products high in nitrogen sparingly. After all, flowers are the main objective in growing peonies. Good soil amendments are: bone meal, fishmeal, well-rotted compost, old manure, kelp, or seaweed. These added to the lower half of the prepared area encourages deeper root development. This often becomes an essential factor in the plant's survival after a harsh winter.

About every 4' - 6' width, test drainage by digging a hole 16" deep, and fill with water. If water is still standing an hour later, dig deeper, adding gravel, sand, broken concrete, or whatever porous material is available. In some instances, a new area may need to be provided; raised beds, terraces and gentle slopes generally provide good drainage. After back filling the area, water well at least once, twice would be better, before setting the root or root ball. This helps eliminate any air pockets, somewhat settles the newly cultivated soil, and gives the new root or plant a moist environment in which to begin its' new life. Whatever the size of the peony root planted, (they can be from 4" to 12" long), give the root room to grow. Cramming a root into a 12" hole surrounded by hard pan, limits the nutrition availability and the future prosperity of the plant. The plant may produce flowers for several years, then seem to just survive; usually under these conditions stem count will diminish. Prepare a hundred dollar area to begin with and enjoy 10 times that many flowers in the future.

Deciding Which Peony to Purchase & Ordering:

Choosing a peony can be mind boggling, especially when viewing a mass as in catalogs, on the web, or in the field. With so many options available, there is a need for parameters. Some useful criteria may be specific kinds of color (solid, mixed, light, pastel, highlighted, bold, bright, dark), specific forms (rose, bowl, cupped, twisted, bomb, rounded, shaggy, neat), specific types (single, semi-double, Japanese type, or double). Other criteria may be The American Peony Society 'Gold Medal Winners', a collection of peonies produced by American propagators, collections by color, form or types, collections by fragrance, collections by seasons of bloom. And there is always the option of throwing a dart at the catalog. This gardener has used all of the above, as one criteria cannot fully represent the world of peonies.

Most bare roots are only available for a short period of time in the fall. When ordering roots by mail order, be certain to tell your supplier that you want delivery as early in September as possible and no later than Oct. 5th for the Anchorage bowl area. Some growers dig & divide their stock as follows: very early - early varieties first, midseason varieties next, and late flowering varieties last. When ordering all types, you may not have the option of a preferred shipping date. The earlier the supplier receives the order, the earlier it will be delivered. Planting later than the first week of October is possible, by filling your area with loose soil and then covering with foam, boards, or plywood, but generally our October temperatures are not gardening-friendly. We have planted as late as October 10th, with good results. To get the desired varieties as well as the early delivery dates, it is strongly suggested you order early in the Spring, soon after receiving your catalogues.

Planting Depth for Bare Roots plant material: When planting bare root peonies, the eyes (potential growth for next year) are usually visibly protruding from the crown tissue. Most growers recommend planting the eyes of the bare root plant material 2-3" below ground level. I recommend planting the eyes 2" below ground level in well-settled soil. If bare root plant material is planted 2" deep in loose soil, settling will occur and by summer the following year, the eyes will be located 4 – 5" below ground level. This results in significantly fewer flowers, which is very disappointing after a long winter.

When planting shallow, (1" or less deep) mound about two shovels - full of loose soil over the planting as protection the first winter. As soon as the mounded soil thaws in spring, carefully remove it with your hands. Eyes may already be emerging especially in early varieties.

Potted Peonies: Most suppliers of potted peonies will set the eyes of the potted root 1-2" below the soil level. Of course, as pots are sometimes shifted about, some soil may be lost. If the woody crown tissue is exposed at purchase, do set this plant two inches below soil level in the garden. Potted peonies can be set most anytime during the growing season. The smaller the container, the fewer the finer feeder roots, and the longer the wait for a fuller plant. If the potted plant has many stems & foliage, care must be taken when transplanting. The current year foliage is important to the life of the plant; breaking stems at this point could be harmful. An option would be burying the pot in the garden, caring for it during the summer, and then cutting the foliage back in late August-early September, and transplanting at that time. If long stems and foliage are not present, proceed as with any other perennial, avoiding breaking roots as much as possible. A dry plant set in a dry hole is not a good beginning. The site preparation would be the same as for bare root planting.

Vigor: All peonies are not equally vigorous; some will mature rather quickly, putting on 5-10 stems in three years, with roots extending 18-24" from the center of the crown. Others will be slower to mature, and may have 3-4 stems and roots less than 12" long in this same period of time. As a rule new divisions will take several (3-5) years to put on an adequate root system necessary for their survival and healthy appearance. In the meantime, plant a few annuals nearby, and put on the patience hat, after all, this peony could be in the same spot for 50+ years. **There is an old saying regarding peonies: 1st year sleep, 2nd year creep, 3rd year leap.**

Moisture: Peonies grown in heavy soil with good drainage perform better, and crowns do not diminish as quickly as those grown in more moist situations. Good watering during May-June may be necessary, but keep in mind if nights stay quite cold and snow melt is slow in spring, the surrounding soil could be waterlogged. Adding more moisture could create problems. When spring is drier, where plants are located in raised beds, or are closely planted to competing plants, more moisture may be necessary.

Air Circulation: Given enough space (4' X 4' area per plant), the occurrence of most peony problems will be reduced, especially during a season of damp, cool days and nights. Commercial growers can get by planting closer, as a good many of their plants will be removed each year, the soil turned, refreshed, and amended, and only sample peonies being undisturbed for many years. In the home garden, peonies are usually planted for the long term.

Location/ Full Sun: Peonies love sunshine; most growers recommend full sun, 5-6 hours per day. Many varieties will grow well in part shade having bright filtered light, but may need an additional 1-2 years growing to compare to the same variety grown in full sun. The first three-four years the plants may appear to be quite different plants. The plants in full sun usually produce flowers more true to their descriptions, bloom at the advertised season and show more vigor in foliage and stem count. Herbaceous peonies receiving mostly morning sun, may need an extra year or two to become prolific. Southern and western exposures generally promote the best results.

Other Information: Caution should be taken at spring clean up. Tools can break away the young peony sprouts that may be emerging under the leaves. A small wire ring around the peony will help identify the plants when tools or foot traffic could be a problem.

Peonies do not like being disturbed once they have matured 3+ years. If the plant is less than 3 years old, generally the entire root ball can be transplanted. Some shock may occur.

When the peony is more than 3 years old, the preferred method is to dig, divide, trim roots and plant as bare root, in the fall if possible. During spring or summer, choose a cloudy or cool day or evening, dig the plant as a whole & set in a shady area, covering the roots with compost, sawdust, or peat moss, and moisten well. Hold in this manner until mid August-early September, then remove foliage and proceed to dividing.

Good Peony Reading: The American Peony Society (APS) publishes many items in the interest of peonies and welcomes letters from their members regarding their experiences growing peonies. Members receive quarterly bulletins full of news and views of members & meetings, past and

present growers, propagators and distributors. Membership is \$7.50 per yr. American Peony Society 250 Interlachen Rd. Hopkins, MN 55343

APS Publications:

The Peonies by John C. Wister, Editor
Peony Handbook (Official Handbook of the American Peony Society)
The American Hybrid Peony
The American Tree Peony
Peonies/A History of Peonies & Their Originators
Peonies 1976-1986-Registered Peonies & Tree Peonies
American Peony Society 75 Years (The Best of 75 Years)

Other Books:

Peonies Outdoors & In/ Arno & Irene Nehrling
The Book of 'The Peony'/ Mrs. Edward Harding/1917 Lippincott
The Peony/ Alice Harding/Introduced & Updated by Roy G. Klehm/1993 Sagapress, Inc, Timber Press, Inc.

Peonies/ Allan Rogers/1995 Timber Press, Inc.
The Gardeners Guide to Growing Peonies/ Martin Page/1997 Timber Press) Inc David & Charles Newton Abbot
Peonies/Jane Fearnley-Whittingstall/ 1999 Harry N, Abrams, Inc.

My wish is that everyone, who plants a peony, enjoy the experience.

I appreciate having the opportunity to bring you some information that has been helpful to me over the years. My peony experience began as the result of joining The American Peony Society.

Judy Wilmarth has been growing peonies personally in Anchorage for 20 years, and commercially since 1991.

Peony suppliers

Caprice Farm Nursery
10944 Mill Creek Rd. SE
Aumsville, OR 97325
503-749-1397 – Cyndi
www.capricefarm.com

Hollingsworth Peonies
28747 290th ST.
Maryville, MO 64468-9508
660-562-3010
www.hollingsworthpeonies.com

Reaths Nursery
N 195 County Rd. 577

Vulcan, MI 49892
906-563-9777
www.reathsnursery.com

Sevald Nursery
4937 3rd Ave. S
Minneapolis, MN 55409
Evenings 612-822-3279

Song Sparrow Farm
13101 E Rye Rd.
Avalon, WI 53505
1-800-553-3715
www.songsparrow.com

The New Peony Farm
Box 18235
St Paul, MN 55118
651-457-8994

Species

Galen Burrell
PO Box 754
Ridgefield, WA 98642

Intersectional Hybrids

Callies Beauz Jardins-Anderson
W6658 Sunset Lane
Ft. Atkinson, WI 53538
920-563-2927