

Planting, Growing, and Caring for Peonies in Truckee and Tahoe

Peonies are long-lived perennials that love long cold Truckee winters. Peonies are extremely cold-hardy (usda z.3), tough, and are almost never damaged by late Sierra frosts. They return and grow larger in Truckee and Tahoe gardens: **one peony can live over 100 years!** Peonies bloom from late spring through early summer, depending on location and variety, and produce magnificent cut flowers. The plant is relatively easy to divide and to share with friends, AND deer almost never bother them!

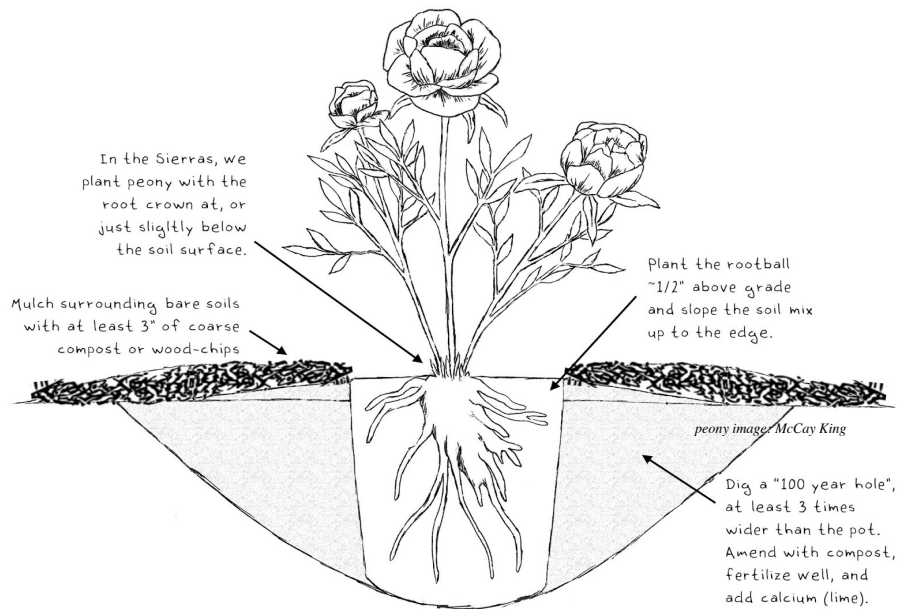
Peony Flower Types - There are six peony flower types to choose from: anemone, single, Japanese, semi-double, double, and bomb. Fragrances vary as well—some plants, such as ‘Festiva Maxima’ and ‘Duchesse de Nemours’, have intense fragrance, others are citrusy and some have no scent.

Peonies in a Landscape - Peonies can be used to line walkways as a low hedge or as a substitute for boxwood. After the blooming period, when fertilized, peony foliage is attractive, dense, and glossy green unlike many other hardy perennials. The leaves turn purplish and yellow in fall. Deadhead peony blossoms as they begin to fade, cutting to a strong leaf for the best aesthetics.

In mixed borders, peonies bloom with columbines, baptisias, and veronicas and combine well with irises and roses. Plant white peonies with yellow irises and blue veronicas. Plant pink peonies with blue cat mints or Corsican violets. Provide full sun and well-drained soil.

Planting Peonies - Peonies like full sun, though they can survive with half of a day if it is uninterrupted. When a peony doesn't bloom it is usually because it either does not receive enough direct sunlight, or it is planted too deeply. Peonies produce the most blooms with at least 6 to 8 hours of sunlight. Space peonies 3 to 4 feet apart, and away from trees or shrubs to allow for good air circulation, but out of high wind.

Dig a generous hole, about 1 foot deep and >2 feet across in a well-drained sunny spot. Add mature finished compost (Kellogg's Amend) to the soil in the planting hole. Incorporate about one cup organic vegetable food or bone meal into the soil mix. Peonies benefit from the addition of calcium (lime), an element lacking in our local Sierra soils.



Don't plant peonies too deep! If the crown of the plant is buried too deep in Sierra gardens; a peony will produce many thin leaves from the crown, often with pea-sized buds that never mature or open. A peony planted just an inch below the soil surface will often never produce mature flowers. When planting a container-grown peony, plant it no deeper than it grew in the pot, and even 1/2" above grade is best. With root divisions, set the root so the eyes face upward on top of a mound of soil in the hole, placing the roots just a half inch below the soil surface.

Then, backfill the hole, taking care that the soil doesn't settle or bury the peony any deeper. Tamp the soil gently. Coarse compost or wood chips, 3-5" deep in a 4-5' diameter around each peony will ensure that the soil's organic matter is being replenished. Our fine silty, mineral soils will return to their near-concrete like state after just a few seasons without mulch. Water thoroughly at the time of planting.

Peony Care - Peony plants require little maintenance as long as they are planted properly, fertilized lightly and mulched broadly. Peonies can take a few years to mature. The old adage "the first year they sleep, the second year they creep, and the third year they leap" applies well to peonies. Peonies do thrive on "benign neglect". Unlike many perennials, they don't need to be divided every few years.

Our poor mountain soils lack important nutrients. Fortunately, peonies are not heavy feeders, so fertilize lightly. Spread organic fertilizer broadly to encourage a wide root system. Use Biosol or G&B Vegetable Food, plus compost or

aged manure, in early summer just after the peonies have bloomed to keep the foliage looking nice and to maximize nutrient uptake.

Many of the showiest cultivars need “peony cages” placed over them in early spring to provide support when the heavy grapefruit-sized double blooms later develop and open. Adding calcium (lime) helps improve stem strength to support the flowers.

Dividing Peonies - While peonies do not NEED to be divided, September is the best time to divide them to produce more plants and increase the population. Cut the stems to ~5”, then dig around the plant in a wide circle, and lift the soil and root system with a spading fork. Cut the root crown into sections that have no less than 3 to 5 eyes (next year’s buds). Replant the root sections, with eyes just below the soil surface. Lightly mulch new plantings to ensure the crowns do not dry out the first fall and winter.

If a peony needs transplanting, September is the best time, when the foliage has changed color. Ideally, peonies should be settled in the ground for about six weeks before the ground freezes. The “autumnal thermal overturn” is in mid-November in Truckee and usually later in the Tahoe basin.

Peony Winterizing - In late fall, when foliage has turned brown, cut the leaves to about 5” above the ground. The petiole stubs provide a snow-catch and some shade for the crown in low-snow winters.

Don’t smother peony crowns with mulch. For the first winter after planting or dividing, mulch VERY loosely with pine needles or shredded bark. Remove crown mulch in the late winter.

Post-Harvest Physiology (cut-flower peonies)

Peonies make wonderful cut flowers, lasting more than a week in a vase. If you have enough to spare, cut long stems in the morning when the buds are like marshmallows, wrap freshly cut peony stems in a damp paper towel, wrap the buds and stems tightly in plastic wrap and then store them in a refrigerator until ready to use, often months later. Give the stems a fresh cut and place them in lukewarm water to wake them up when removing them from storage

Ants on My Peonies

Gardeners often wonder why ants crawl on the peony buds. They are attracted to the peony’s sugary exudates on the bud scales. Energy efficiency is an evolutionary driving force and plants seldom “waste” energy like sugars. It is thought that having ants eat the sugary droplets may help

loosen the tight sepals around the peony buds or that the ants will protect the buds from harmful pests. Do not spray the ants; they are in no way harmful and are likely helping the peonies.

Peony (*Paeonia species*) History

There are between 30 and 40 species within the *Paeonia* genus from Europe, through Asia and western North America. California hosts the only two North American species. There are over 7000 accepted cultivated varieties, hybrids and selections. Quite a selection over many years.

The Garden Peony, *Paeonia lactiflora*, from Asia (Tibet to Siberia) is also known as Chinese Peony. This species has been in cultivation in Chinese gardens since the 6th century and was introduced to European horticulturists in the late 1700’s where its amazing size and color was highly prized. European settlers started bringing ornamental peonies with them to the US in the 1830’s and by the 1850’s American nurseries were offering them for sale. Settlers moving west brought peonies with them wherever they stayed.

The native European *Paeonia officinalis* is an attractive plant that blooms in Truckee gardens mid-late May. Villager nursery has plants of this species propagated from seed collected from long-time Truckee grown plants.

Japanese peonies and the ITOH peonies are challenging to grow in Truckee but do well in the milder climate of the Lake Tahoe basin and around Donner Lake. The Japanese peonies, *Paeonia x suffruticosa*., are relatively cold-hardy woody plants that need to be wrapped and well protected in winters. The flowers are almost twice the size of Chinese garden peonies. The ITOH Peonies are intersectional hybrids of Chinese and Japanese peonies. Attempts were made to cross these species for centuries without success until in the 1940’s. Toichi Itoh spent decades of his life developing just a small handful of amazing varieties. The ITOH peonies are herbaceous, dying to the ground each winter but rising to produce enormous and colorful blooms each summer.

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