

Clip 'n' Save – Peonies

Peonies (or Paeonia): These elegant and showy flowers often take center stage in wedding and other formal floral arrangements but can be grown in most foothill gardens. There are three types - herbaceous, tree and intersectional peonies - with nearly all of today's varieties being hybrids. Some have scents like old-fashioned roses with single, semi-double or double blooms up to 10" across and range in color from pure white to yellows, pinks, purples and reds. The varieties often found in local nurseries and garden centers are herbaceous. Most are descendants of the Chinese species, *P. lactiflora*

Size: Herbaceous: 2 – 4 feet tall with wide, spreading, deep green foliage.

Exposure: Full or part morning sun with afternoon shade. Provide shelter from strong winds.

How to Plant: Peonies do best in deep, humus-rich, moist soil that drains well. Choose your location wisely as they do not often transplant successfully and resent disturbance yet can thrive for 50 years or more. Peonies are usually sold as bare-root tubers or in nursery pots and should be planted in the fall. Space them 3 to 4 feet apart with "eyes" up and away from other trees and shrubs so they don't compete for food and water. Dig a 2x2 foot hole and backfill, taking care not to bury the roots more than 2 inches below the soil surface. If soil is particularly heavy with clay or sandy, add compost to enrich and water deeply. Peonies are particularly attractive arranged in rows with colorful border plants in front.

Pruning: Deadhead spent flowers after they bloom in the spring, cutting back to a full leaf so stems are not sticking out of the foliage. Cut back foliage to ground level to avoid diseases and insects that can winter over.

Water needs: Water regularly, up to an inch a week during the growing season. Peonies prefer regular moisture; neither too soggy nor too dry.

Soil: Soil pH should be neutral or slightly acidic.

Fertilizing: Spare the fertilizer. If your soil is poor, work in a little high phosphorous fertilizer like a 3-15-2 and not again for a few years if at all. Keep the nitrogen low.

Pests: Peonies are surprisingly hardy but can succumb to Verticillium wilt and nematodes when soil is not well drained. Never spray for ants as they are feeding off of nectar and in exchange are destroying other (bud-eating) insects.

Snapshot: Peonies have a reputation for being difficult but they require little maintenance so long as they are planted correctly and in the right location. Avoid mulching too deeply and clear mulch away from the plant's base in the winter months as peonies benefit from being chilled or at least cooler temperatures. Choose varieties that bloom in early spring so flowers will last longer ahead of foothills heat. Like young children, peonies require time to develop and bloom but your patience will be rewarded with gorgeous, outrageously full blossoms that will truly make your garden a showplace. An added plus for the home gardener, cut flowers brought indoors can easily last a week or more when snipped before the flower bud is fully opened.

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