

GROWING PEONIES

by Sue McDavid

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If there was such a thing as a perfect perennial, the peony would be near the top of the list. Planted and cared for correctly, it will continue to offer gorgeous flowers year after year. Keep in mind that there are two types of peonies: Tree peonies and herbaceous peonies, the latter being the most frequently planted type here in El Dorado County and the one discussed in this article.

Given a good start, herbaceous peonies will flourish for decades. Fall is the best time to plant the rhizomes; always be sure they have at least three "eyes", which are small nodules on the rhizome. Position the rhizomes with the eyes facing upward no deeper than 2 inches below the soil surface. Planting depth is crucial because peonies will not bloom if they are planted too deeply. In addition, peonies do best if planted in an area that gets 6 or more hours of sun exposure. They also need good soil drainage and a prolonged winter chill period.

If planting several peonies, space them 3 to 4 feet apart; they need proper air circulation. Peonies are fairly drought tolerant once established, but should be watered more often in the spring when they are putting on new growth. Once the flowers have faded, cut the flower stalks off. Peonies do not need fertilizer; all that is required is perhaps a top-dressing of humus every year. After hard frosts hit in winter, all the stems can be cut back to the ground.

It is a myth that peonies need ants crawling on them in order to bloom. Peony buds have small nectar-producing glands on the scales that cover the flower buds, and ants love this nectar. They will not do damage to the flowers and will tend to repel other bugs that might eat the flowers.

There is no prettier flower in spring than a peony and there are many colors to choose from. Plan on putting a few or several in the landscape this year.

Saturday, April 2nd, UCCE Master Gardeners will present a free three hour class on Spring and Summer Vegetables. This class was originally scheduled for February 23rd, but cancelled due to the weather. The class begins at 9:00 a.m., and will be held in the Veterans Memorial Building, 130 Placerville Dr. in Placerville.

Saturday, April 9th, UCCE Master Gardeners will present a free four hour class on Organic Gardening I & II. This class has been combined as the original 2 classes were scheduled for March 19th and 26th, but were cancelled due to the weather. The class begins at 9:00 a.m. and ends at 1:00 p.m., and will be held in the Veterans Memorial Building, 130 Placerville Dr. in Placerville.

The Master Gardener 2nd Annual Spring Plant Sale on Saturday, April 16th, promises a great selection of annuals, vegetables and perennials. A complete list of plants to be offered for sale can be found on the Master Gardener website at http://ceeldorado.ucdavis.edu/Master_Gardener/.

Presentations on popular gardening topics will be given every half hour starting at 9:30 a.m. and ending at 2:00 p.m. Topics to be covered are:

- Using Native Plants for Bee Health
- Polyculture: Growing your Fish and Vegetables Together
- As the Worm Turns: Vermiculture for Gardeners of All Ages
- Great Natives for Local Landscapes
- Learn How to Use Your Irrigation Controller
- Make a “Tussie Mussie” – Learn the History and Art of Expressing Yourself in the Language of Flowers (Gold Country Herb Society)
- Native Plants for Watering Efficient Gardening
- Rose Budding
- Resolving Common Problems in Roses
- Container Planting for Color

The sale will be held in the parking lot of the Veterans Memorial Building, 130 Placerville Dr. in Placerville and benefits Master Gardener community outreach programs.

Master Gardeners are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9 a.m. to noon, by calling (530) 621-5512. Walk-ins are welcome. The office is located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. For more information about our public education classes and activities, visit our website.