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Plant Some Peonies This Fall

By Susan Pelton, UConn Home & Garden Education Center

Early fall is the perfect time to plant, transplant, or divide peonies in your landscape. Peonies are herbaceous perennials that have few rivals for their floral display and foliage. Their exquisite, large blossoms, often fragrant, make excellent cut flowers and the foliage provides a lovely background for annuals or other perennials after the blossoms have faded.

There are four types of peonies that are generally grown in the home landscape; the woodland peony (*Paeonia japonica*), the woody tree peony (including *Paeonia suffruticosa*), the garden or herbaceous peony (*Paeonia spp.* hybrids), and the intersectional peony (also known as the Itoh, a hybrid of the garden and tree peonies). Selecting a few from each category of peony will ensure an extended bloom time: from late spring with the woodland varieties, then on to the tree peonies, then the herbaceous, and finally the intersectional hybrids.

Peony flowers are available in a wide range of colors, everything from pristine, pure white, soft and deep yellows, every shade of pink imaginable, salmon, oranges, reds, maroons, and purples. There are even peonies in shades of green from chartreuse to pale green-yellow that offset some of the red and burgundy shades beautifully. Flowers may any combination of colors in the form of edging, stripes, or deeply colored flares surrounding the stamens.

And if the color options aren't enough of an incentive, consider the many flower forms of peony. The American Peony Society recognizes 6 forms although there are some flowers that bear more than one characteristic. Single forms are considered the fundamental peony flower shape with five or more petals surrounding the stamens and a central cluster of carpels. The Japanese form is similar to the single but the stamens are thicker and more petal-like. The small, narrow petal/stamens of the Anemone form are actually called petaloids. The bomb form has stamens that are so petal-like that the entire flower looks like a scoop of ice cream. All of these forms still have the same base flower of the single form. The last two forms are semi-double and double. Semi-double forms have several layers of decreasing-size petals surrounding or intermixed with stamens. The double has a similar appearance to the bomb form but without the 'scoop' look.



Left to right, the single, bomb, and anemone forms of peony blooms

Site selection is the next step and is quite important. Peonies thrive in full-sun locations out of strong winds where they can receive 8 or more hours of sun each day. They need fertile, well-drained soil with a pH between 6.5 and 7.5. As Connecticut soil runs acidic a soil test through the UConn Soil and Nutrient Analysis Laboratory is recommended prior to planting. Any fertilizer amendments should be mixed into the soil that will be 2-3" below the tuber or transplant.

Dig a hole that is large enough to accommodate the roots and incorporate aged organic matter in the bottom. Peonies are generally sold as bare-root tubers. Select only specimens that are firm and free of rot. Soft spots may be trimmed with a knife. Place the tuber in the prepared hole so that the eyes (the small, red-colored buds) are one to two inches below the soil's surface. Planting too deeply will prevent the plant from blooming. Backfill the hole and water well. A light layer of mulch may be applied to conserve moisture and minimize weeds.



Plant a tree peony tuber with 4 to 5 inches of soil covering the graft. The graft can be recognized by the ridge on the stem and a difference in bark texture. Deep planting allows the graft to develop its own root system.

Ongoing care and maintenance of peonies includes providing support for tall, double form hybrids that can become top-heavy when in bloom. Remove any faded blooms to prevent seed development by cutting the stem back to where it is hidden by foliage. Plants may be mulched during the growing season to conserve water and minimize weeds but after the first year peonies should not be mulched during the winter.

Peonies may incur some fungal diseases, especially during warm and humid weather. Planting in full sun with adequate air flow around the plants may help as will removing any plant debris. For the diagnosis of plant diseases and suggested control options please contact the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at 877-486-6271.