

# Growing Peonies in Our Region

Courtesy of Shy Valley Plant Farm and available on our website at [www.shyvalleyfarm.com](http://www.shyvalleyfarm.com)

Choose a well drained location with *at least* 6 hours of sun a day. Morning sun is highly recommended to insure quick dry off of dew. Plan to space your peonies at least 3 feet apart. You may interplant with flowering annuals the first year or two, choosing annuals that prefer dry conditions, like zinnias, nicotiana, calendula, salvias, marigolds, and verbenas. Peonies are also excellent companion plants to perennials that will not need extra watering and that won't spread and compromise the peony. Irises, alliums, agastache, dianthus, baptisia, geranium, asters, phlox, nepeta, sedum, thermopsis, veronicastrum, and Japanese anemone are classic choices. Peonies, as a medicinal herb, are also an appropriate and beautiful addition to a sunny herb garden. In any case, be sure to leave adequate space for air to circulate.

Dig a generous hole, 18 inches around and 12 inches or more deep. Add a shovel full of well rotted manure or compost and ½ cup of a blend of potash and bonemeal, and mix in with the soil. Plant your peony roots with the roots going down and most of the eyes pointing up. If the roots seem dry, soak in cool water for 30 minutes to an hour prior to planting. If not, dip in water to wet. Remove any damaged or diseased roots, and excessive eyes, small weak ones first, ending with no more than five good eyes. Dust roots with beneficial mycorrhiza, to insure increased uptake of nutrients from the soil and provide protection from disease and environmental stresses.

Plant no deeper than 1 inch from surface, 2 inches in higher elevations. Mark the spot. You may mulch with up to a 2 inch layer of leaves or pine straw the first year, but, if you do, pull the mulch away from the eyes in spring. Do not use plastic mulches.

As the peony shoots emerge in the spring, add a sprinkling of your potash/bonemeal blend, avoiding direct contact with the crown. You can use a fish emulsion fertilizer after the bloom period, but before midsummer. Fertilizing later in summer is not recommended, although if you've forgotten to add the potash/bonemeal blend, you may do it in fall, at the same time you remove the spent top growth.

The first season, leafy top growth will be minimal and there will be few, if any, flowers. You should remove all but one flower bud per plant for the first year, and even the second, to promote long term growth and health of the plant by allowing it to direct it's energy into leaves and roots rather than flowers. The third year, you should have a strong, vigorous plant with a number of blooms, and if you are doing things right, you should have loads of blooms for years to come from that point on. Deadheading is recommended.

Peony feeder roots are just under the surface of the ground, and are easily disturbed by weeding. Use weed control measures such as cardboard or paper mulch to keep weeds from gaining a foothold. Keep mulches away from the crown and more toward the drip line of the plants, hand pulling weeds closer to the plants. Peonies are especially put out by weedy grasses; don't let them get a foothold.

In our climate, you should not need to water established peonies. Take extreme care when watering your new peonies the first year by watering deeply and **only when necessary**, allowing soil to dry between watering. Water early in the day, directing water to the base of plants rather than sprinkling from overhead. Lack of moisture should not be a concern after year one.

Peonies are usually pretty disease free, but if they have a problem in our region, it is usually due to either powdery mildew or botrytis, both of which can be prevented or kept in check with good gardening practices. Sanitation, including removal and disposal of affected plant parts, and removal of spent foliage at ground level in fall can prevent this disease and keep it from spreading or reoccurring. Careful water management is also key in disease control and prevention, as is insuring adequate sun, nutrients, and air circulation. Follow the practices outlined here, and you will enjoy your peony plants for years to come.

## *Recommended resources:*

American Peony Society

Peony, by David Michener and Carol Adelman, 2017, Peonies, by Allan Rogers, 1995, and The Peony, by Alice Harding, updated by Roy Klehm, 1993, all published by Timber Press.