

## **MSU Extension Publication Archive**

Archive copy of publication, do not use for current recommendations. Up-to-date information about many topics can be obtained from your local Extension office.

Peony Culture  
Michigan State University Cooperative Extension Service  
F Folder Series  
Staff of Horticulture  
Issued May 1950  
4 pages

The PDF file was provided courtesy of the Michigan State University Library

**Scroll down to view the publication.**

EXTENSION FOLDER F-150

---

29.21

# PEONY CULTURE

---

BY STAFF MEMBERS  
OF THE  
DEPARTMENT OF HORTICULTURE

---

MICHIGAN STATE COLLEGE  
COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE  
EAST LANSING

---

Cooperative Extension Work in Agriculture and Home Economics. Michigan State College and the U. S. Department of Agriculture, cooperating. C. V. Ballard, director, Cooperative Extension Service, Michigan State College. Printed and distributed under acts of Congress, May 8 and June 30, 1914.

# PEONY CULTURE

The peony is one of the most hardy, showy and easily grown of all garden flowers. The plants will survive the most rigorous winters without protection, require little special care and, when established, will continue to bloom for many years if undisturbed and maintained in a healthy condition. The color range, beauty of form and lasting qualities of the flowers makes them especially desirable for decorative purposes.

The flowering period of the peony is relatively short, varying according to weather conditions from 3 to 10 days. It is possible, however, by selecting varieties, with different flowering seasons to have them in bloom for a month or more. After the flowers are gone the foliage remains green and gives a good effect in the garden throughout the summer.

## TYPES OF PEONIES

Two general types are 1) the common herbaceous peony which dies down to the ground in the fall, and 2) the tree peony which produces a woody growth and sheds only its leaves as do other deciduous shrubs.

**Tree Peonies** — Three distinct types of tree peonies are grown; the European, Japanese and Lutea Hybrids. Of the three types of Japanese flower most freely and are usually preferred. The flowers vary from single to semi-double, often with crinkled petals resembling crepe paper. The Lutea Hybrids are considered the best of all tree peonies, but they are difficult to propagate. When started, they are as hardy as any shrub grown. The size of tree peonies varies with the variety. Some remain very dwarf. Others attain a much greater size up to 4 and 5 feet in height. The average is from 2 to 3 feet in height with about the same diameter unless they are very old.

**Herbaceous Peonies** — These are classified into four groups: single, Japanese, anemone, and the semi-double and double-flowering types. The semi-double and double varieties are most popular and are generally considered the most beautiful of all peonies. The single, Japanese and anemone types are especially adapted to landscape planting. They also make good cut flowers. The double

forms make excellent cut flowers and are particularly prized for decorative purposes.

## WHERE TO PLANT

The plants grow best in full sunlight. A nearby windbreak of trees or tall shrubs will protect the plants from wind and driving rains during the blooming period. Trees and shrubs should not be so close that their roots can compete with those of the peonies or so that their branches can seriously shade the peony plants. Peonies are especially suitable for planting in front of shrubbery, along walks or drives and in the general perennial border. They are often interplanted with lilies or other perennials which have rather tall unsightly stems.

## SOILS

The plants will thrive in practically all types of garden soil. A deep, rich, moist, well drained clay loam is best. If the plants are grown for propagating purposes, lighter sandy loams are preferred. Deep preparation of the soil is important, as it improves drainage and permits the incorporation of manure or other organic matter into the soil. Fresh manure should not be used. If the soil tends to become waterlogged at any time during the year artificial drainage must be provided. Soil may be dug out to a depth of 18 inches or more and 3 or 4 inches of small stones or gravel put in the bottom of the trench before refilling with soil. If the original soil is poor, the rich top soil may be brought in or the trench filled with soil and manure compost if it is available.

## PROPAGATION

The easiest and most satisfactory method to propagate the herbaceous peonies is by division of the roots. To divide a clump dig around and under it carefully in the fall and lift it out of the ground without unnecessary cutting or breaking of the roots. Wash soil from the roots, cut the tops off within 1 or 2 inches of uppermost bud and separate into as many divisions as can be made, each containing 3 to 5 strong eyes or buds. Smaller divisions may be planted, but will require several years to make good plants. A 3-5-eye division will produce a better plant than a larger clump. Discard roots that have been broken off without an eye.

## PLANTING

Early fall (September 1 to October 15) is the best time for planting. The planting may be done in early spring, but it is better not to dig and divide old plants at that time of year. Plants dug the previous fall and kept in cold storage over winter can be planted in the spring with satisfactory results. When fall planting is done apply a mulch of straw, leaves or such material after the ground freezes to prevent heaving. Remove the mulch early in the spring.

Large spreading vigorous growing varieties should be spaced at least 4 feet apart. Dwarf varieties may be set as close as 2 feet if the plants are intended to form a compact row or hedge.

Avoid planting herbaceous peonies too deeply. The buds or eyes should not be covered with more than 2 inches of soil. If buried deeper, the plants often fail to bloom or even to produce flower buds. Dig holes large enough for the roots to be spread as much as necessary. A stick laid across the hole will help one to judge the correct depth at which the root should be set. Pack soil firmly around the roots. Be sure to firm the soil on which the root rests to prevent settling later. Water if the soil seems dry. A handful of bone meal thoroughly mixed with the soil around each plant at planting time is beneficial.

Tree peonies are planted rather deep to induce new shoots or sprouts to grow from the roots which will form a larger shrub.

## CARE OF PLANTS

Keep peony plants well hoed or cultivated. Begin cultivation when the plants start to grow in the spring and continue at frequent intervals during the growing season. Cultivate as deeply as possible without disturbing the roots. If the soil is deep and rich little fertilization may be needed. On soils of low fertility annual applications of well rotted manure, bone meal or 4-12-8 or similar analysis fertilizer ( $\frac{1}{4}$  to  $\frac{1}{2}$  pound per plant) are desirable. Apply and work into the soil around the plant in early spring. Two or three applications of liquid manure, beginning about 10 days or 2 weeks before blooming, will produce larger and better flowers.

Remove side buds from stems of double flower-

ing varieties as soon as they start to form if large, extra fine flowers are desired. If the first lateral bud is retained instead of the terminal one a later period of blooming is secured. If a quantity of bloom for mass color effect is desired the lateral buds may be allowed to develop. In dry seasons it is advisable to apply water at the time the buds are developing.

**Cut flowers for decorative purposes** before the buds have fully opened. It is best to cut them around 8 or 9 o'clock in the morning just as the outer petals are unfolding. Take them to a cool room or cellar as soon as possible, strip off the lower leaves, and place the stems in deep containers full of cool water. Leave them there for a few hours before taking them to a warm room or arranging them in vases. When cutting the flowers do not cut too low. Leave 2 or 3 leaves at the bottom of the stem.

**Remove old flowers** as soon as the flowering season is over, and before seeds form. Otherwise the plant may be weakened by seed production. Keep foliage in a healthy condition until late fall.

**Remove stems and foliage** of herbaceous peonies after the tops have been killed by frost. Cut stems off close to the ground, gather and burn.

## PEONY DISEASES

**Botrytis blight** is the most prevalent disease. In early spring young stems turn black, wilt and die. Later, young flower buds are attacked. These turn black and die. Older buds may fail to open and the petals become a dark brown rotted mass. On the leaves the disease is identified by large irregular spots which become brown and dry.

**Control** by gathering and burning all stems, leaves and other plant debris in the fall. In the spring destroy all rotted or wilting shoots, also infected buds and leaves as soon as detected. If a winter covering has been used it should be removed early in the spring to avoid damp conditions around the young shoots. Fresh manure favors the development of the disease. Spraying with bordeaux mixture or dusting with a copper lime dust is helpful.

**Measles** — Often called "blotch" and "rust". Small red, purplish, or reddish-brown spots on stems and leaves. On the leaves some spots en-

large, forming large brown to purplish-black blotches. Remove old tops in fall or spring.

**Root Knot** — Caused by nematodes or eel worms. Plants stunted. Stems short and spindly. Leaves small and light-colored. Large fleshy roots are short and irregularly knotted or swollen. Destroy all infested plants. Secure healthy plants and set out in nematode-free soil.

## INSECT PESTS

**Rose Chafer** — A grayish tan colored beetle about ½ inch long. Feeds on flowers, eating large holes in the petals. Often destroys whole blossoms. May be controlled with 10-percent DDT dust.

**Rose Curculio** — A bright red snout beetle about ¼ inch in length. Gnaws deep holes in the flower buds. Most abundant in June and early July. Control with 10-percent DDT dust.

**Ants** are annoying but cause no direct injury to peonies. They feed on the secretions from the flower buds. They may be destroyed, by dusting with 10-percent chlordane over the ant hills.

## REASONS WHY PEONIES FAIL TO BLOOM

1. **Plants in an unfavorable location.** The plants do not thrive in heavy shade. Shaded conditions cause foliage only to develop. Avoid planting under or near large trees, or too close to tall shrubs or house walls.
2. **A hard impervious subsoil.** Such soils are poorly drained, restrict root growth, and correspondingly reduce the amount of bloom.
3. **Buds killed by late spring frost.**
4. **Planting too deep.** Old plants that appear to be healthy but do not bloom should be dug carefully, divided and reset at the proper depth.
5. **Recent transplanting.** Small divisions often do not make good plants for 2 to 5 years. Some varieties do not bloom for several years after planting.
6. **Root troubles** caused by nematodes, rots or virus diseases.
7. **Botrytis blight** which attacks shoots and buds.
8. **Lack of mineral nutrients, particularly phosphorous.**