



Tree and Intersectional Peonies

Tree peonies are one of the longest-lived perennials and will probably be blooming after we are gone . . . all the more reason to plant them so our children and their children can enjoy their unparalleled beauty and fragrance year after year! Tree peonies have woody stems that persist through the winter, unlike herbaceous peonies that die back completely every year. Intersectional peonies (also known as Itoh Peonies) are a cross between tree and herbaceous peonies, with the best qualities of both parents. Tree and intersectional peonies are easy to grow with similar requirements, and reward you with spectacular blooms year after year. See our Herbaceous Peony information sheet for specifics on that type of peony.

The first rule of peony cultivation is identical to the first rule of real estate—choose the location carefully. Tree peonies are slow growing and can live for centuries, so it's a good idea to find the perfect place to plant them! They are not fond of being moved about in the garden and in doing so you may delay blooming for a year or more so it is important to pick a good permanent spot. Peonies prefer neutral to slightly alkaline soil (pH 6.5-7.5)

Good drainage and at least 6 hours of sunlight (preferably morning sun) are critical. Standing water will kill peony roots. In our climate, a reprieve from hot afternoon sun will ensure good bloom results with less stress on the plant. Tree peonies do not fare well with root competition, so place them 3-5 feet away from other shrubs.

The planting hole should be 24 inches deep and twice as wide as the container. Add well-rotted compost or soil conditioner along with composted cow manure in the bottom of the planting hole. Cover this with a layer of outdoor planting soil to keep the roots of the peony out of direct contact with the manure. Add BulbTone fertilizer to the existing soil that you have removed from the hole and mix together with more soil conditioner. Tree peonies should be planted deeply. Grafted tree peonies should be planted so that the graft is four to six inches below the surface of the soil (this should be the depth it is planted in the pot, so keep the soil level even with the ground when you plant, unless roots are exposed-those should be covered with soil).

If you are worried about the planting depth of your tree peony it is always best to err on the side of planting it a little too deep.

Tree and intersectional peonies usually do not require staking or peony cages.

During the first two growing seasons after planting a new herbaceous or intersectional peony, ensure that it gets a good soaking every two to three weeks. This will allow the plant to get enough water while the fibrous root system becomes established. Remember that peonies do not like wet feet and be careful to not over water, the soil needs to dry out fully between watering.

When the flower buds begin to swell, you are sure to see ants crawling on them. Sorry to put those old wives' tales to rest, but ants are not necessary for the peonies to bloom. The unopened flowers secrete a super sweet substance that the ants like to eat, and they won't do the peonies any harm, so leave them be!

After the bloom, unless you are interested in seeing if your peony will produce seeds, dead-head your peonies to promote root growth over seed formation. Just remove the spent flower, leaving as much stem as possible. Tree peonies shouldn't need pruning, but if you feel the

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need to improve the shape, do it immediately after bloom-next year's buds are formed very soon after the flowers fade.

Tree peonies don't need any special fertilizer except a fall side dressing of rotted compost or BulbTone, placed 16 to 18 inches out from the crown to keep them healthy. Peonies do need to be kept well watered before blooming in spring and well weeded in summer to prevent competition for nutrients and for good air circulation to avoid disease. The blooms of peonies last 2 weeks, but the glossy foliage lasts all season.

DISEASES

Powdery Mildew

Leaves are covered with a white, powdery substance. Powdery mildew is not as much a problem on tree and intersectional peonies as it is on herbaceous peonies. While unattractive, powdery mildew won't kill the plant. Heat and high humidity promote the disease. Keeping the leaves sprayed with neem or horticultural oil can prevent some mildew, as can foliar fungicides containing sulfur or mancozeb. Follow all label directions when using fungicides. One home preventive is 1t baking soda, 1qt. water and a few drops of liquid soap sprayed on leaves weekly. Once started, powdery mildew is difficult to reverse, but it can be slowed. Keep fallen leaves raked up and dispose of in trash in fall-do not compost.

Botrytis

Buds turn brown or black and fail to open. This is brought on by cool, moist conditions. Prune off dead buds to prevent the disease from spreading further down the stem. If conditions are right for botrytis, use a systemic or foliar fungicide labeled for botrytis on peonies as label directs.

WHEN TREE OR INTERSECTIONAL PEONIES DON'T BLOOM

Lack of bloom on intersectional peonies is usually due to age or establishment. It can often take three years for intersectional peonies to establish in your garden-do not move them during that period or you will set them back another year.

This is also true of tree peonies. Another factor in tree peonies not blooming is that they are not planted deeply enough (the opposite of herbaceous peonies). There should be no roots exposed on your tree peony.



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