

Peonies are one of the best-known and most dearly loved perennials. They are outrageously beautiful when in bloom and make fabulous cut flowers. While there are hundreds of named varieties, there are only three main types we typically see in gardens.

Types of Peonies

Herbaceous Peonies (*Paeonia lactiflora*)



'Coral Charm' Bush Peony

Sometimes called bush peonies, herbaceous peonies are very long lived, and can flourish and bloom for 50 years or more. Herbaceous peonies bloom in late spring. The flamboyant flowers can be very heavy, so place grow-through supports as foliage emerges or stake the stems when plants are in bud. Stems die to the ground each winter and grow back in spring. Herbaceous peonies do best in cold winter areas, so can be grown quite successfully in many areas of Contra Costa County. In warm winter coastal areas, such as Oakland and Berkeley, herbaceous peonies can be more challenging, and blooming may be inconsistent.

Tree Peonies (*Paeonia suffruticosa*)

Tree peonies are deciduous woody shrubs that can grow 4-7 feet tall and 4-5 feet wide. Blooming in spring a bit earlier than herbaceous peonies, their spectacular flowers are up to 10 inches in diameter. Tree peonies are hard to find at retail nurseries (we don't have a source for them at Orchard Nursery), but are available through mail order sources. They don't require winter chilling, so can be grown throughout the Bay Area.

Itoh Peonies

The life work of Japanese plantsman Toichi Itoh, these peonies are a hybrid of herbaceous and tree peonies. They don't require winter chilling, and are resistant to both powdery mildew and botrytis blight. They are herbaceous, dying back to the ground in winter. Flowers are very large, and emerge when herbaceous peonies are finishing their bloom. Sturdy stems don't usually require staking. Itoh peonies can be grown successfully everywhere in the Bay Area. For a second flush of bloom, cut Itoh peonies down to about 6 inches and fertilize after the first blooms have finished.



'Bartzella' Itoh Peony

Planting Peonies

Where to plant:

Peonies are sun-lovers, needing 6 or more hours of direct sun each day. In areas with cooler summers, give them as much sun as possible. In very hot inland areas they will tolerate afternoon shade. Peonies don't respond well to transplanting, so choose your site carefully

How to Plant:

Herbaceous and Itoh peonies won't bloom if planted too deeply. The growing points of the tuber (eyes) should be at or just below the soil level. Tree peony tubers should be planted 3-4" deep.

When planting in the ground dig a hole twice the width of the pot, if possible, and slightly deeper than the root ball. Mix the soil you removed with amendment such as **Gold Rush** or **Bumper Crop**, so that the final mixture is one-third to one-half amendment. Add a starter fertilizer such as **Master Start** or **Sure Start**. Remove the peony from the container and position it in the planting hole so that the soil in the pot is at or slightly (1/4") higher than ground level. Fill in the hole with the amended soil, firming it around the root ball and leaving no voids. Use excess soil to build a watering basin around the plant, and water thoroughly.

Peonies may also be planted in large (minimum 18" wide and deep) containers. Use **Master Nursery Professional Potting Soil** for best results.

Peonies are generally deer resistant, however, deer will often sample new plants in a garden. To protect your peony, spray with **Liquid Fence Deer and Rabbit Repellent** for several weeks.

Watering and Feeding

Peonies need regular water once they begin growth in spring and throughout their flowering period. If there's no rainfall, water deeply once or twice a week. Peonies are relatively drought resistant once established, but really look their best with weekly watering during summer.

Feed with **E.B. Stone Organics Rose & Flower Food** or **Master Nursery Rose & Flower Food** as foliage emerges, and then once more after flowering. Avoid fertilizer that is heavy in nitrogen, as it may suppress blooming.

Potential Problems

No flowers – Failure to bloom is usually caused by improper planting, too little light, or insufficient chill. When planting herbaceous peonies, make sure to plant so that the eyes (the point at which new growth emerges) are at or just below the soil. Also make sure your plants get plenty of sun, 6 or more hours a day. Try planting Itoh peonies if you live in a warm winter area.

Powdery mildew or Botrytis – Fungal diseases are encouraged by too little sun and high humidity. If possible, move the plant so that it gets more sun and air circulation, and water in the morning so humidity is lower at night. Spray with **Copper Soap Fungicide** to prevent the problem and protect new foliage.

Ants - Ants enjoy the sugary syrup produced by peony buds and do not harm the plant.