

Tree Peony Information

- ***Where should I plant my tree peony?***

Tree peonies are extremely hardy and will survive almost anywhere, in both sun and shade. They prefer an airy, reasonably open situation as air movement around the plant helps prevent fungal diseases like peony wilt. However, avoid a completely exposed situation where flower petals could blow away quickly and shorten the life of the flowers. These plants begin to grow very early in the year and young developing buds can be damaged by frost if exposed to early morning sunshine. Ideally, plant your tree peony where this can't happen, i.e. a north, south or west facing aspect.

- ***Soil***

Generally speaking tree peonies prefer a fertile yet well drained soil, large amounts of organic matter are not especially useful. They favor a neutral to slightly alkaline soil. Clay, chalk or sand is fine as long as they don't become too dry in the summer or very wet in the winter.

- ***Planting***

Dig a large planting hole, incorporating some bone meal or a general fertilizer into the soil. Add a small amount of well-rotted garden compost or manure if you wish. We do not recommend peat as a planting medium because of its acidity. Plant bare rooted tree peonies deeply. If your plant is grafted (French, American and Japanese hybrids), the graft union should be at least 3.5 inches below the soil. This will encourage the tree peony (scion) to make its own roots and basal shoots. Chinese varieties are propagated by division and don't have a graft union and deep planting encourages new growth from beneath the soil. Pot grown, rootballed or containerized specimens of all types should be planted slightly deeper than the soil level in the pot. Water them well after planting and during the following summer.

- ***Subsequent Cultivation***

Usually a tree peony will grow away producing large handsome leaves and often some new shoots from the base. However, the main stem may not produce a shoot from the tip. Depending on the size of the plant you buy, flowering can happen any time from the first year to 4 years from planting. Sometimes a newly planted tree peony will appear to make little growth, if any, in its first season but all its activity happens underground. Providing the foliage looks reasonably healthy, don't panic. This may just be a 'settling in' period. Occasionally the main stem may die back a little. Although this might be worrying, wait until the next spring when vigorous growth should resume from the lower part of the stem or even from below soil level. If your plant is grafted, look out for suckers from the herbaceous rootstock and cut these off at ground level. The foliage is quite different from that of the grafted tree peony. Wait until you are sure these suckers are from the rootstock before removing them, as your tree peony will also produce basal shoots and these are what you want.

- ***Feeding***

Tree peonies are heavy feeders but dislike large doses of fast acting nitrogenous fertilizers. They respond well to a generous, early autumn top dressing of blood, fish and bone, a slow release organic fertilizer. Its high potash content encourages flowers to develop. A light sprinkling of a general fertilizer can be applied in the spring if you wish.

- ***Pruning***

Tree peonies respond well to pruning. You should aim for a broad, multi-stemmed shrub of up to 4-5' in height, which will not need staking. Chinese and American types have a naturally branching habit and will need less regular pruning than the Japanese and French types. In February, just as the growth buds are swelling, trim off all the

dead wood. You will often find that the new shoots are coming from lower down the stem, leaving a small dead spur. Whole branches will sometimes die. These should be pruned back to a live bud, or to just above ground level. With a young plant, only remove dead wood during the first two years to help get the plant established. Don't be tempted to prune. After this if your plant forms a good shape, no regular pruning is needed. However, if your plant has few stems and is poorly shaped, then prune hard. You may see buds at the base of the stem or shoots coming from below the soil. Prune back to these or down to 6" or less from the ground. Even if you can't see any basal buds, adventitious ones will form. The best time to prune is early spring, although this may mean that you sacrifice some flowers in the coming year. You can prune directly after flowering but re-growth is slower. If you have, or inherit, an older tree peony, which has never been pruned, it can be transformed and rejuvenated by applying this technique. It is best to prune just one main stem each year, cutting it down to about 15 cms. It takes courage to do this, but is usually successful.

- ***Moving a Tree Peony***

There's no need to worry about moving even a large, mature tree peony. Just move it during early autumn as you would any other woody deciduous shrub.

- ***Tree Peonies in Pots***

Tree peonies can be grown successfully for several years in a large container (at least 12" diameter) and make very fine pot plants. When planting, it is important to use a soil-based compost. Your plant should be grown outdoors during the summer, autumn and winter. In the spring, when the flower buds swell, you could move it into a cool conservatory to enjoy the blooms but be sure to return the plant outside when the flowers fall. Tree peonies must be outside in winter, as cold temperatures are needed to form the flower buds.

- ***Peony Wilt***

Tree peonies rarely suffer problems from pests and are unpalatable to rabbits and deer. The only disease you are likely to encounter is peony wilt. This may appear in early spring, usually before flowering. Soft brown lesions develop at the base of new shoots and buds. These wilt and become covered with a characteristic gray bloom. As soon as any damage is seen trim back the affected shoots to healthy wood. Spray the whole plant with a systemic fungicide containing carbendazim. This should be repeated at 10-day intervals until no further damage can be seen. The fungal spores of peony wilt can over winter on old foliage so it's important to pick up and burn old leaves in the autumn. With deep planting, good hygiene and regular observation, although peony wilt may appear occasionally, it rarely causes serious damage to a mature plant.

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