

Premier Paeonies – Paeony Care

Overview

Paeonies are healthy vigorous plants that reward the gardener with a spectacular display of luxuriant blooms in the spring. The dark green foliage then provides an attractive backdrop for other flowers throughout the summer. They are 'easy care' and return year after year once established. They require frosty conditions during the winter so do not grow satisfactorily north of the Central Plateau of the North Island, making southern gardens the envy of our northern colleagues. Roots can be dug and divided during the dormant period in the autumn, each root yielding three or four new plants for the following year. A newly planted root may flower in the first year but will take four years to reach full maturity, at which time it will produce up to thirty or forty blooms depending on variety. After nine or ten years flowering vigour may decrease and can be restored by digging the plant and dividing. Each plant can therefore provide a lifetime of floral pleasure. Different varieties flower at different times so careful selection can ensure flowering paeonies in the garden from late October through to late December.

Planting

Paeonies are best planted in the autumn so that feeder roots can establish over the winter ready for the rush of growth in the spring. Paeonies grown in bags may be planted carefully during the growing season. The planting site should be in full sun and well drained. Each plant will eventually require about one square metre of clear space but needs less space for the first two or three years. Avoid trees and overhanging branches as this is often a cause for paeonies failing to thrive.

Prepare the site by digging an area of about half a square metre. Unless the ground is very poor do not incorporate compost or fertilizer, especially blood and bone, as paeonies are not gross feeders and most of the first year's shoots will come from the starch reserves in the roots. The first year's leaves will then replace the root starch and produce new roots during the growing season.

The main destroyers of paeonies are root rot (from planting in poorly drained areas) and botrytis, a fungal infection, so it pays to avoid planting near decomposing material which is a reservoir for fungal spores. Some people mulch around their paeonies, but for the same reason I like to keep the ground clear of rotting material and weeds as this decreases the likelihood of botrytis infection.

Dig a hole about 400mm deep in the center of the prepared area and plant the root with the pink eyes facing up so that they are 4 to 5 cm below the surface when the ground is leveled off again. If the site is likely to be wet in winter, it may pay to mound it up slightly and plant the root beneath the center of the mound. Firm in gently, as the eyes can be quite brittle, and do not water in unless the ground is very dry.

Place a marker beside the crown to remind you to not hoe deeply in the area later in the year!

Keep free of weeds by hand weeding.

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General Care

For general garden care mechanical weeding is best but for massed plantings a variety of herbicides are available to control weeds without harming the plants. Keeping paeonies weed free is important for both growth vigour and disease control. Very sheltered sites increase the risk of botrytis, so do not let the plant become crowded by dense surrounding vegetation.

Paeonies tolerate dry conditions, especially from January onwards, so do not over water. The main water requirement is from emergence to the end of December and it is better to provide two or three application rather than frequent small waterings.

In the first year it may be best to allow only one bud to flower as this will increase the energy the plant will put into the roots for the next season. Do not cut down the foliage after flowering but allow it to remain until it begins to brown off at the end of summer. Then cut down all stems leaving 5 cm stalks to mark the site of the plant. Spraying with the fungicide, Euparen, as soon as you have cut the stems will reduce the chances of fungal infection the following year. In subsequent years it is reasonable to cut up to half of the stems for cut flowers. Disbudding any side buds will increase the size of the main flower head on the stem. Leaving the side buds on the stems will, however, prolong the flowering season as the lateral buds tend to flower later than the central bud.

A general garden fertilizer can be used to improve size and colour of blooms. Paeonies do best in a soil of pH 6.0 to 6.5 and have a high calcium requirement, so the application of a dressing of lime in the autumn is often beneficial. In the spring, just after emergence of the new shoots a dressing of super phosphate and calcium nitrate will improve stem length and flower size. Commercial potato fertilizer comes close to the above specifications and can be used as a substitute.

Some varieties may need staking as the flower heads become very heavy once open. For cut flowers it is best to cut when the buds begin to soften and a small bubble of air can be felt beneath the sepals. If placed in a vase at this stage the flower will open fully and have a prolonged vase life.

Overall paeonies are easy to care for and will give many years of pleasure in a wide variety of garden settings.