



Fall is the Best Time to Plant/Transplant Peonies

By Dawn Pettinelli, UConn Home & Garden Education Center

While fall is generally noted as a great time to plant spring flowering bulbs, it is also the perfect season to plant or transplant peonies. In fact, many nurseries only ship peony roots in the fall. Check out the absolutely gorgeous peony offerings of Connecticut's Cricket Hill Gardens (www.treepeony.com) or White Flower Farm (www.whiteflowerfarm.com) and place your orders now for October delivery.

Deciding which peony or peonies to purchase is not an easy task as the range in colors, flower types and growth habits is diverse. To start with, decide whether you want a herbaceous, Itoh or tree peony. Herbaceous peonies are most common with a huge array of solids and bicolors. Most are fully double, often scented and least expensive. Tree peonies have woody stems, are slow to establish, hardy to zone 4 and may reach 4 to 5 feet in height and width. Itoh peonies are a cross between the two and were originally developed by a Japanese horticulturist, Dr. Toichi Itoh. Peruse through online or paper catalogs and you are sure to be smitten by at least one selection.



Herbaceous peony 'White Cap' by dmp2021 and Itoh peony 'Bartzella' by Louise Carroll, 2021

Next review the spot you have selected for a peony planting site. Peonies do best in at least 6 hours of full sun each day. Blossoms last longer if they do receive a bit of shade so partially shaded sites would also be suitable.

Soils should be deep and well drained with a soil pH between 6.5 and 7.0. There is still time to have your soil tested (www.soiltest.uconn.edu). If phosphorus and potassium levels are below optimum, these nutrients can be added before planting. Plan on giving each peony at minimum a 3 foot by 3-foot bed. Space peonies 3 to 4 feet apart depending on their mature size. To prepare the planting site, remove existing vegetation, mix in any recommended limestone, phosphorus and potassium. If the soil is low in organic matter, mix in a couple of inches of compost or coconut coir to a depth of 8 to 12 inches.

Peonies are typically shipped bare root in the fall with moistened organic material around their roots. Since depth of planting is critical to their success, some nurseries mark on the plants where the soil line should be. If not marked, look for the 'eyes' on the rootstock. These are small pink buds and will give rise to next year's flowering stems. If they are buried too deep, they will be unable to emerge. A good rule of thumb is to set the plant where the buds are no more than 2 inches below ground level.

Place the bare root peony in a bucket of water while preparing the hole. Dig a good-sized hole about 2 feet wide and as deep as the root. Carefully set the peony root in and backfill until about half the root is covered. Add some water to settle the soil. If the area was not previously amended with limestone, plan on mixing in a cup or so with the backfilled soil. Finish filling the hole and water one more time. A mulch of shredded bark or other organic material will keep the roots moist and the soil warm longer into the fall so the roots can get established.

Peonies are among the longest living perennials sometimes spanning generations. Occasionally they need to be moved to a different garden spot or perhaps shared with family members as moves or other passages of life occur. Fall is the best time to transplant or dig and divide plants. Start by cutting the foliage back to the ground. Make sure to carefully dig the root ball starting at least a foot away from the crown. If just transplanting, try to not disturb the roots and replant at the same depth. If trying to divide, carefully wash away the soil around the roots and divide into pieces each having 3 to 5 eyes. Keep cool and moist and replant as soon as possible.

Plants take a few years to become fully established so do not be disappointed if for the first year or so, blooms are scarce. They should be fertilized once each spring with a low nitrogen fertilizer. Staking may be necessary with some cultivars.

Peonies are said to symbolize a happy life. Like old friends, once established, they will greet you with large, gorgeous blossoms in late spring or early summer. This fall consider adding a peony or two to your landscape.

For questions about planting peonies or on any home or garden topic, contact the UConn Home & Garden Education Center, toll-free in CT, at (877) 486-6271, visit us at www.ladybug.uconn.edu or call your local Cooperative Extension Center