

Ask A Master Gardener
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Peonies

Q. I love peonies, but haven't had much success growing them. Could you give me some pointers? Tara A.

A. I think peonies are wonderful. They come in beautiful colors: white, pink, red, yellow and more that may be single, semi-double or double; in herbaceous (*Paeonia lactiflora*) and tree forms (*Paeonia suffruticosa*); even a fernleaf form (*Peoria tenuifolia*) that is unusual and difficult to grow; and the scents are heavenly. While peonies are grown for their beautiful, fragrant blooms, which make great cut flowers, their foliage is attractive all season long and looks good in a large border.

But, when it comes to peonies we Southern gardeners are at a disadvantage. Peonies are one plant that grows better in the colder climates. In fact our Zone 7 is about as far south as peonies will grow. In his book *Armitage's Garden Perennials*, Allan Armitage talks about the beautiful peony blooms in his grandmother's Zone 3 Montreal garden he enjoyed growing up.

Karen Russ and Bob Polomski of the Clemson University Extension Service (<http://www.clemson.edu/extension/hgic/plants/landscape/flowers/hgic1170.html>) say that the herbaceous peonies are a bushy plant that grows to a height of 2-3 feet and a width of 3-4 feet at maturity. The tree peonies which are actually shrubs grow to 4-5 feet. The beauty of both lies in the large, showy, fragrant blooms they produce in mid to late spring.

One key to growing peonies is patience. The herbaceous type will not bloom for a year or two after planting and the tree peonies may take 2-3 years to bloom. Also, peonies do not like to be disturbed, so if you need to move them after planting they will again take a couple of years to bloom, even if they have been blooming regularly before moving.

It is best to plant your peonies in the fall. Walter Reeves says that peonies need three things to do well in our area: loose, well-draining soil; morning sun with protection from the hot afternoon sun; and chilly winters. The *Southern Living Garden Book* (2nd Edition) says peonies need: a site in full sun with light afternoon shade away from the competing roots of trees and shrubs; good drainage with plenty of organic material dug into it and a high-phosphate fertilizer (Russ and Polomski suggest a pH of 6.5-7.0); herbaceous peony rhizomes should be no deeper than one inch below soil surface and tree peonies should be planted with the graft 3-4 inches below the surface. The *Southern Living Garden Book* also says to fertilize twice annually: after blooming and again in the fall with a balanced fertilizer such as 8-8-8 and bone meal; and provide plenty of room for air circulation to avoid fungal disease. Again patience is a key to growing peonies. While they are long lived plants that may live for up to one hundred years once established they do grow slowly and will take two to three years after planting to bloom.

Planting depth is key to having beautiful peony blooms. If the rhizomes are planted any deeper than one inch below the surface your peony will probably not bloom, because of our mild winters. Chilling of the rhizomes is essential for good blooming. However, it is helpful to mulch them well during the summer to protect them from our hot summer sun, as long as you pull the mulch back during the winter so they can be exposed to the winter cold.

Clemson Extension's Russ and Polomski recommend several varieties for our area:

- 'America' has early, single, large, fiery red flowers with golden center tuft.
- 'Blaze' is a true red, early single with rounded petals and a sunny yellow center.
- 'Bride's Dream' is a creamy white Japanese. Center is soft yellow to cream.
- 'Coral Charm' has deep coral buds that soften to coral peach when open, with a gold center. Early, semi-double.
- 'Do Tell' is a Japanese midseason peony of shell pink with a rose, pink and white center.
- 'Felix Crousse' is a double Japanese flower type with ruby red flowers.

And on his website Walter Reeves says he has had success with:

- 'Festiva Maxima' (white)
- 'Bowl of Beauty' (Jap. with rose pink petals, creamy yellow staminodes)
- 'Red Charm' (a wonderful true red, but be prepared to pay through the nose)
- 'Kansas' (rosy red double, very reliable)
- 'Shirley Temple' (blush daughter of Festiva Maxima)
- 'Paula Fay' (bright pink semi double)
- 'Mons. Jules Elie' (light pink)

He says: "All the above are more or less fragrant. 'Festiva Maxima' and 'Shirley Temple' are intensely fragrant."

For more information on peonies or other horticulture questions, contact a Carroll County Master Gardener Extension Volunteer at the UGA Extension Carroll County Office at 900 Newnan Road in Carrollton, 770-836-8546 or via email at ccmg@uga.edu.