

Flower Power

ALEC WHITE extols the virtues of peonies and explains how easy they are to grow

Every English garden deserves at least one beautiful peony to grace its borders in our opinion. Some may hold back from choosing a peony because of the relatively short flowering season. Many believe that the peony is a difficult plant to grow, best left to experienced gardeners, but both concerns are invalid – it is an excellent low-maintenance plant, perfect for all levels of expertise.

The sheer size of the flower is incredible, with many of the intersectional peonies producing flowers the size of dinner plates and with colours ranging from white to yellow, pink to purple and everything in between. There are single, semi-double and double flowers, all of which are exceptionally beautiful and that is before you look at the many peonies that are fragrant. For example, peony lactiflora *Duchesse de Nemours* AGM is an exquisite double white flower with a cream centre and the most delightful perfume. A personal favourite is the delicate blush flowers of peony lactiflora *Catharina Fontijn*, which produce a delightful yet intense perfume. Despite a popularly-held view that peonies are delicate and difficult to grow, the truth is that they are very easy to grow and extremely hardy, making them perfect for all gardeners. They will live happily in a decent-sized container for some years, but ultimately they will be happier in the ground. There are of course, a few things to remember with peonies but get these right and you are looking at decades (in some cases peonies can live for 60 years) of hassle-free gardening and the finest display of colour and scent that simply gets better with the age of the plant.

■ Remember not to plant your peony too deeply

The tuberous roots must not be planted more than about 2.5cm below the surface. If they are planted any deeper they may give wonderful foliage (some of the intersectional peonies, such as *Bartzella* AGM or *Julia Rose* have finely cut leaves which turn crimson red in the spring and autumn and many of the herbaceous or garden peonies have strong red stems and light green soft foliage), but they simply will not flower.

If you have a peony in the garden and it isn't flowering, it is probably because it has been planted too deeply or it has been buried when you have diligently mulched your borders. Wait until autumn and then, taking care not to damage the buds on the roots, lift your peony and re-plant it at the right depth.



■ Plant your peony in a sunny position

Although many varieties will tolerate some shade (for example Peony lactiflora *White Wings*) if your peony is in heavy shade it will be reluctant to flower well.

■ Plant your peony in fertile, free-draining soil

Peonies are not generally too fussy about the soil and are quite happy in chalky or clay soils provided that it is free-draining – they don't like to sit in water in the winter.

Once planted, your peony will be quite content to be left alone. In fact if you have rich, fertile soil you probably don't need to feed your peony, but if your soil is not so good, a balanced, general fertiliser such as Growmore, applied in the spring, should do the trick.

It is also a good idea to cut back and remove the dead leaves in autumn to avoid peony wilt. Peonies aren't going to grow like trifids and take over your garden; most will get to about 80-90cm tall and about 60-80cm wide and of course they will die down in the winter before emerging in the spring (this does not apply to the tree peonies).

Peonies do not really suffer from pests and diseases, requiring little care or attention once established. In fact, deer and rabbits also leave them alone.

Peonies take time to mature and you must therefore be patient. While it may be tempting to purchase a smaller, cheaper plant and wait for it to grow, my advice is to buy a well established peony, one that is at least three to five years old or more, to be sure of success.

The show that peonies put on may be relatively short, but what a show it is. As if that isn't enough, peonies are excellent value for money because their low maintenance requirements, hardiness and decades-long lifespan means that the peony is well worth the initial outlay.

Peonies also make fabulous cut flowers. Varieties such as Peony lactiflora *Sarah Bernhardt* AGM or Peony lactiflora *Pink Hawaiian Coral* or Peony lactiflora *Festiva Maxima* AGM are excellent examples with long stems.

The only real drawback is the relatively short flowering period, but with careful planting you can get peonies flowering across a season. Plant peonies lactiflora *Festiva Maxima* AGM, *Bowl of Beauty* AGM and *Sarah Bernhardt*

AGM to ensure you have flowers from May to July. Peony lactiflora *Sarah Bernhardt* AGM is a late flowering variety and will provide stunning scented double pink flowers.

Then there are the intersectional (or Itoh) peonies. This is where it really gets interesting, because these plants are a tree peony and herbaceous peony hybrid; they die down in the winter and emerge again in the spring, but they have the large, delicately-fragrant flowers similar to a tree peony in the most incredible colours, often fading through several shades.

Intersectional peonies are still relatively difficult to come by, unusual and highly collectable. While herbaceous peonies often require a little staking or support, the intersectional peonies are shorter (about 75cm) and use a tree peony framework, meaning that they do not require support even though the flowers are enormous and, like a herbaceous peony, they are covered in blooms (sometimes 40-50 blooms per plant). And the best bit? The best bit is they flower for



longer than the herbaceous peonies, usually for four to five weeks. Unique and breath-taking, intersectional peonies are just as hardy as herbaceous peonies and as easy to grow – look at *Lollipop* or *Cora Louise* for dramatic and spectacular examples.