

Growing Peonies

by Phil Wood, Seattle Chinese Garden

Three types of peonies:

Herbaceous peonies, the most familiar ones, die to ground each fall, bloom around Memorial Day

Tree peonies maintain a woody stem and bloom on old wood, so do not cut down in the fall. They have larger flowers, 8-10", bloom mid to late April into mid May.

Itoh hybrids are a cross between the two—tree peony like flowers on stems that die to the ground each fall, bloom mid to late May

Soil

Plant peonies in well-drained soil, they do not like wet feet in winter. They prefer a neutral to slightly alkaline soil. pH 6.5 to 7.5. Consider a soil test to determine pH. PH can be changed with lime. Amend planting area with compost.

Light conditions

Herbaceous peonies like to bake in full sun, as do Itoh hybrids. Tree peonies can take part shade, needing 5 to 6 hours of sun daily.

Watering

Peonies like infrequent deep watering. Water new plants by soaking once a week. Older plantings require less frequent watering, soaking deeply every two to three weeks.

Fertilizing

Best practice is to fertilize tree peonies three times a year: At fall clean up after leaves drop, apply 1" compost. As leaves emerge in spring, apply compost or low nitrogen fertilizer (such as 5-10-10) then again as flowers fade. An alternative is fish and kelp emulsion (Neptune's Harvest is one brand) as a root drench at fall cleanup and as a foliar feed when leaves emerge.

Disease

Botrytis: leaves wilt and have brown streaks. Use an appropriate fungicide as leaves emerge. Keep all dropped **leaves picked up**.

Pruning

Because herbaceous and Itoh peonies die to the ground in the fall, they need no pruning. Tree peonies maintain a woody stem through the winter. When pruning aim for a broad, multi-stemmed shrub of up to 4-5' in height, which will not need staking. 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. 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.