

When thinking of a perennial garden in May it is difficult to imagine it void of the old-time favorite, Paeonia, or as it is commonly known, peony. While the flowers and foliage of peonies are staples in any perennial garden, there are other great benefits to including them in your perennial garden.

The variety of colors and forms available in peonies is vast. White, pink, red, coral and yellow flowers are common to both herbaceous and perennial peonies. In addition to the range of colors, flowers also vary by form with singles, doubles and Japanese forms. Leaves of peonies range from fern-like to broad. Some have hints of red, others are deep greens, and some are nearly chartreuse. These leaves are not only beautiful, but also long lasting, providing interest to the perennial border from spring through fall.

Another wonderful feature of peonies is their scent. Most peony blooms are strongly, sweetly fragranced. This makes them an excellent planting near patios where their fragrance can be enjoyed, or as a cut flower with a perfume that fills the air indoors.

To achieve the most enjoyment from peonies, plant them for a succession of blooms. Depending on the variety of peony planted they will bloom anytime from late spring to early summer. With a bit of planning, up to six weeks of peony blooms can be enjoyed each year.

While beautiful and fragrant, peonies are also low maintenance. Few pests bother them. They are quite deer resistant, as they have a very bitter taste, which deer dislike. Peonies seldom have insect problems, although they may attract ants, one of the few insects tolerant of the bitter sap of the peony. While you will frequently see ants crawling around on the unopened peonies, there is no cause for concern, as they do not harm the plants. Rarely Botrytis blight can affect peonies. To avoid the spread of this fungus remove and destroy shoots each fall. If the fungus reappears the following spring treat it with any general fungicide.

Other low maintenance characteristics of peonies are their drought tolerance and long lasting nature. While supplemental watering is a good practice during the first year after planting or transplanting, it is rarely necessary in subsequent years. And, once in place peonies can be left undisturbed for years. Unlike other perennials they do not demand to be regularly divided, and can actually be left untouched unless more plants are desired. When dividing perennials it is important that each section contain three to five eyes (or buds).

One of the few maintenance complaints growers occasionally express is that peonies must be staked else they fall over. Many gardeners who have little respect for flowers that cannot stand-up on their own have written off the possibility of having peonies in their gardens. These gardeners should take a

second look peonies as there are many new varieties with stems strong enough to hold even the largest peony bloom upright.

If the beauty and low maintenance nature of peonies makes them appealing to you, make sure you choose a peony you really love, as they will be in your garden for years to come. Also take care to place them in a location where they will be happy and thrive.

Peonies prefer to be planted in full sun to light shade, with light shade best for protecting against fading of pastel-colored blooms. "Light shade" is key however, as too much shade can prevent peonies from blooming. For gardens with light to medium shade, try a tree peony as they tolerate shade a little better than herbaceous peonies. In addition to preferring full sun, peonies also prefer a well-drained, neutral soil.

Peonies are best planted and transplanted in the fall. It is essential that when placed in the ground they not be planted too deep, or else they will not flower. One inch below the soil surface is plenty deep. Err on the side of too shallow, as more soil can easily be added without disturbing the plant.

If you are in the market for a May flower with few problems and the benefit of being drought tolerant, you will not find a more wonderful plant than the peony. Your grandmother's garden probably had one, your garden should as well.