

The Culture of Herbaceous and Tree Peonies

The culture of the peony is relatively simple. The plant thrives in practically all types of garden soil, but grows best in a rich garden loam. The soil must be well drained and retain adequate moisture during the flowering season of the plant. The plants need plenty of sunlight. Peonies will not do well in shade or in low areas that become waterlogged. Peonies planted in shade are more subject to diseases than when in full sun.

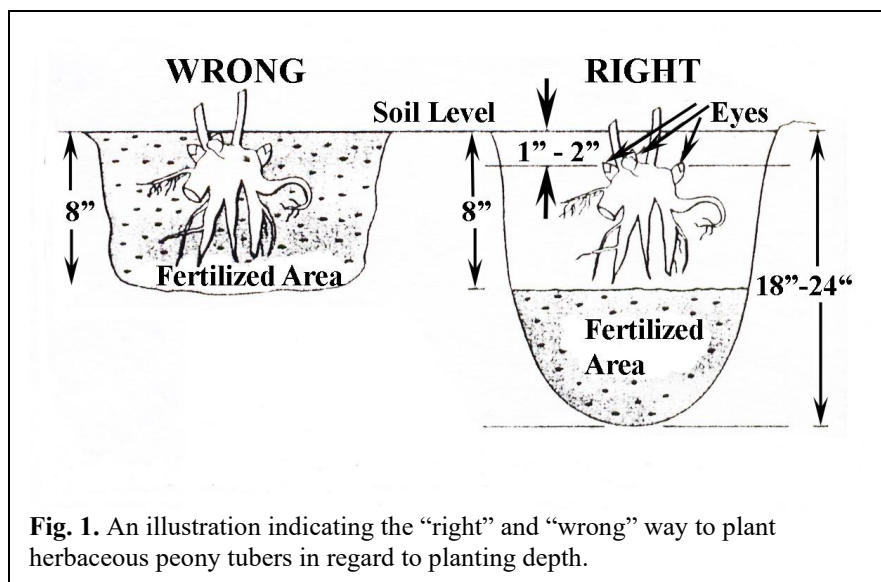


Fig. 1. An illustration indicating the “right” and “wrong” way to plant herbaceous peony tubers in regard to planting depth.

Planting herbaceous peonies: The best time to plant, move and/or divide a peony is in the late summer-early fall, from September 1 to October 15. This gives the plant time to establish roots before the winter. Space plants 3 to 4 feet apart. Peonies are tolerant of slightly acid soil, but if the soil pH is lower than 6.0, ground limestone will be needed. It is recommended that you have the soil pH tested first before adding limestone. You can obtain information on soil pH testing from the [Cornell Cooperative Extension – Suffolk County web site](http://www.ccesuffolk.org) or contact the office directly. Leafmold, compost or composted manure may be added as soil amendments.

Dig a hole 1-1/2 to 2 feet across and 2 feet deep. Replace the soil in the bottom 1 foot of the hole with good garden loam, to which bonemeal or superphosphate (0-20-0) has been thoroughly mixed. Bonemeal may be added at a rate of one pound (1-1/2 cups) to each bushel of soil replaced in the hole. Superphosphate should be added at a rate of one-half pound (1/2 cup) per bushel of soil replaced in the bottom 12" of the hole, to prevent burning the roots. Place the peony root in the hole so that the eyes (sprouts) on the top of the root are pointing up. The eyes should not be over two inches below the ground level when the peony is finally in place (**Fig. 1**). Fill the hole with loose topsoil, working it in carefully around the roots. Water the peony root in well.

For the first winter only, newly planted peonies should be mulched after the ground freezes. Sawdust, straw, evergreen boughs, or soil mounded up may be used as a mulch to prevent heaving by frost action. Remove mulch in spring before the new growth starts.

Planting tree peonies: The procedures are similar to planting herbaceous peonies, except for two major differences: Allow 4 to 5 feet for spacing of tree peony plants. Also plant the tree peony deeply to permit its own roots to form more rapidly and abundantly. The union of the scion and the rootstock should be at least 5 to 6 inches below the ground level. (**Fig. 2**).

If the plant is small, make a hollow around the plant, filling in with soil as the plant grows.

Disease Control: To reduce the chance of disease, primarily *Botrytis* (a grayish-brown fungus on stems, leaves, buds), spraying with a fungicide may be necessary. The first spraying should be done just after the plants break through the ground. It should be repeated when the plants are about half grown and again just before they bloom. To prevent leaf spot they can also be sprayed several times after blooming. Contact Cornell Cooperative Extension - Suffolk County for up-to-date fungicide recommendations.

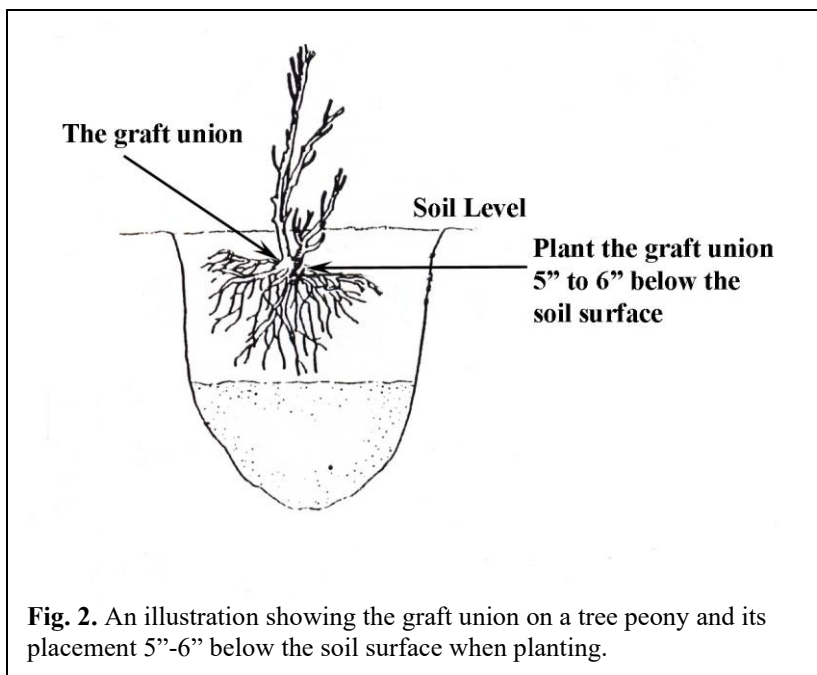


Fig. 2. An illustration showing the graft union on a tree peony and its placement 5"-6" below the soil surface when planting.

Fertilization: If the peony was planted in properly enriched, fertile loam to start with, the plant should not need additional fertilizer for 3 to 4 years. Over fertilized peonies will produce foliage instead of flowers, so fertilize with discretion. The type of soil and current nutrient status of the soil will determine the need for additional fertilizer. Porous soils lose their fertility more rapidly, as nutrients are leached out by rain. Keep all fertilizer away from the crowns of the plants. Spread it over the area where the roots grow, 6 to 18" from the crown, and thoroughly scratch it into the soil. Apply fertilizer in the late summer, preferably a slow release type.

Fall Clean-Up: After September the tops of herbaceous peonies should be cut to the ground once they have dried out. Never cut tree peonies back to the ground, unless the stem is diseased, as the next year's growth starts from the buds formed on the old wood. All foliage of both, herbaceous

and tree peonies, should be collected and destroyed or composted to prevent diseases.

Digging and Dividing: (Fig. 3). Divide herbaceous peony plants in late September, after the stems have been cut off almost to the ground. Leave enough stem to handle the plant by. Next using a spade, shovel, or spading fork cut all around

the plant as deep as the tool will go, about 6" from the outside of the plant, cutting away from the crown. Reverse the tool and go around the plant, loosening it by gently prying. Lift the plant out carefully. Wash the soil off with a hose so you can see the roots better.

Using a sharp butcher's or hunting knife carefully cut all roots back to 4-8 inches, enabling you to see where they are joined to the crown. The best divisions come from the outside of a large plant. The roots should be joined to the crown at or near the base of the eyes. The new division should have 3 to 5 good eyes and several roots 4 to 6 inches long. Be sure all cut surfaces are smooth and clean. Cut out all rotted portions and destroy any diseased plants. Plant the new divisions immediately.

Tree peonies do not divide as readily as herbaceous peonies. Older tree peonies can be divided when several branches appear off the main root system. Be sure that

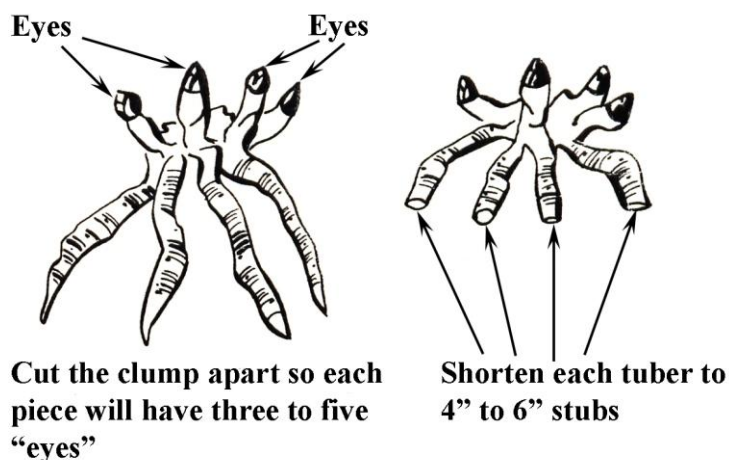


Fig. 3. An illustration showing a peony clump after dividing with 4 eyes and its tubers shortened to 4" to 6".

every top branch has a root on it before dividing.

Cultivation: Shallow cultivation should begin early in spring and continue often enough to keep the weeds down and the soil aerated. It should continue until the fall. Applications of mulches can be applied to reduce weeds and help retain soil moisture.

Watering: Peonies need an even supply of water from the time they come up until they die back in the fall. Give them a thorough soaking down to the bottom of the roots when it is a dry season. Repeat this procedure as necessary if the soil becomes dry again. Avoid frequent (several times per week) and shallow irrigation. Deep watering is important during the summer, as well as, throughout the flowering period, as the plant is producing eyes for next year's growth.

Resource: *Notes on Planting Herbaceous Peonies in NYS*. The Cornell Plantations Ithaca, NY. ABP, 3/24/80. *Notes on Care of Herbaceous and Tree Peonies*. The Cornell Plantations Ithaca, NY. ABP, 3/24/80.

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