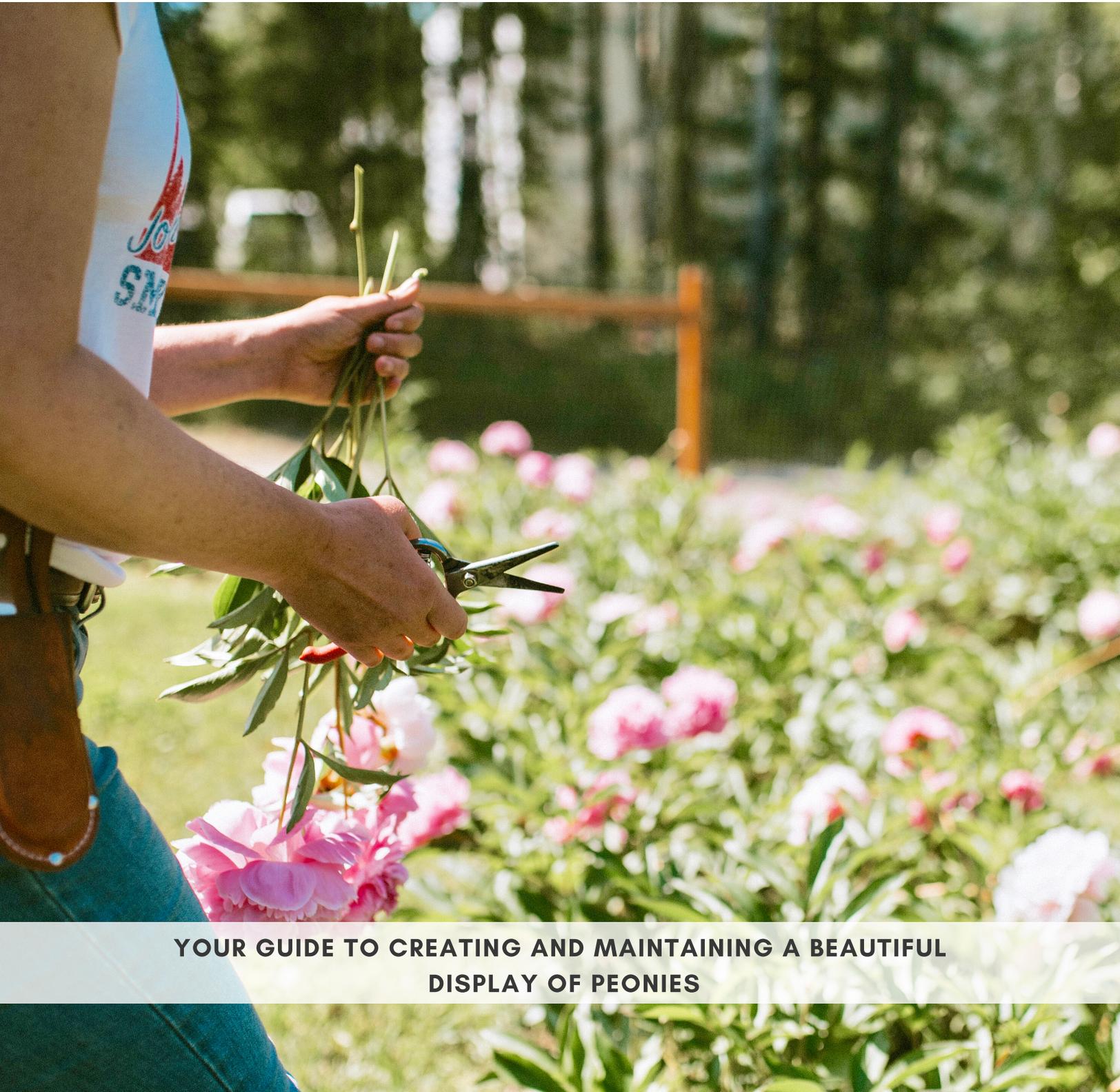


HOW TO PLANT A PEONY CUTTING GARDEN



**YOUR GUIDE TO CREATING AND MAINTAINING A BEAUTIFUL
DISPLAY OF PEONIES**



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INTRODUCTION



Is there anything more thrilling than preparing a garden plot that will pay floral dividends for years to come? Many gardeners plant peonies for pure enjoyment, but peonies also play an important role commercially as a high-dollar flower for floral design work. As a farmer-florist, you can grow the cultivars that compliment your design style, including some that are otherwise hard to find or not available on the commercial market. You also have total control over the harvest, selecting only the most perfect buds for your design work.

A well-tended peony garden can thrive for 50 years or longer, gifting the fruits of your labor to future generations of flower lovers. A peony garden can also add value to your property and set you apart in the market for the right buyer, should you ever decide to sell.





Herbaceous peonies are perfect for commercial production due to the quality of the blooms and the extensive variety of cultivars available. Many types feature long and sturdy stems, and the flowers come in a broad range of colors and forms, including double, semi-double, bomb, and single. Blooms from most herbaceous cultivars perform well in both the vase and garden. Some varieties are highly floriferous, meaning they will produce many buds on one stem (a terminal bud with secondary side buds) while others may produce only one terminal bud and very few or no side buds on each stem.

A grower can spend hours researching peony cultivars and planning their beds, so to help with this we developed a free guide, *Passionate for Peonies*, which features 24 cultivars that are perfect for farmer-florists.

However, what about the less-glamorous aspects of developing a peony cutting garden? Things like soil nutrition, irrigation, and ongoing plant maintenance. By looking at the big picture and focusing your efforts in all of these areas from early on you will maximize the long-term production potential of your cutting garden, and also enjoy the peace of mind that comes from beginning a project with a solid plan.





PLANTING LOCATION

Peonies are relatively easy to grow when planted in the right location with proper soil conditions. Most cultivars grow well in zones 3-8 and prefer a sunny spot with excellent drainage. Growers in warmer climates may want to select a location that receives partial shade to shield the plants from the heat of mid-day sun. In cooler climates, peonies will enjoy being in a sunny spot all day long. Peony roots may rot if planted in soil that does not drain well, so select your planting site with care. Raised beds can help alleviate drainage issues, and clay soils will need to be heavily amended to encourage good drainage.

SOIL PREPARATION

The quality of your soil is of the utmost importance. Before planting, invest the time it takes to make sure that the pH is near neutral (6.0 to 7.0) and that nutrients and organic matter are distributed throughout the soil column. A professional soil test may sound daunting but is actually very easy and will give you the best results for improving your soil. The Cooperative Extension service in your area can review the soil test and provide advice on how to supplement for any nutrient deficiencies as well as how to adjust the soil pH.



HOW TO COLLECT A SOIL SAMPLE

- Using a clean trowel or shovel and a bucket, collect a 'slice' or boring of the soil profile from multiple spots within your cutting garden.
- Thoroughly mix all of the borings in the bucket to make a composite mix of your soil.
- From the composite mix, remove 1 cup or so of soil and place it in a bag to send to the lab.

It's that easy and, depending on the size of your cutting garden, can be done in less than 30 minutes.

There are many outstanding soil labs available to analyze samples. Once you select a lab, plan to use that lab for future soil samples as well, to ensure your analyses will be comparable from year to year. In our peony cooperative, most of our growers send their soil samples to Brookside Labs in Ohio, as we have found them to be fast, helpful and their prices competitive.

When reviewing your soil report, it can be hard to make sense of all the numbers, so take it to your local Cooperative Extension office for interpretation. They will review the results and advise you on the exact amount of amendments needed to boost your soil fertility.

Your future self will thank you for taking the time to build the quality of your soil before planting.





WHEN TO PLANT

The gardener's rule of thumb has been to order peonies in spring and take delivery of them in fall at planting time. However, there is some wiggle room when it comes to planting time, depending on your growing zone. Growers in warmer climates may want to stick with fall planting, as it allows the peony to become well established over winter, before the intense heat of summer kicks in. In cooler climates, many growers have had success with planting peonies in either spring or fall. If you are unsure, consider experimenting with both spring and fall plantings, and the vigor of your plants over time will let you know what is best for your microclimate.

PLANTING DEPTH AND SPACING

You've probably heard that when it comes to planting peonies, don't plant them too deep (or you may get a lot of foliage and no flowers) but also don't plant them too shallow (or they may not survive winter). The goal is to plant the root in such a way that the 'eyes' (buds located on the root at the base of each stem) are just 1-2 inches below the soil, so they have some protection but aren't too deeply buried.



PLANTING

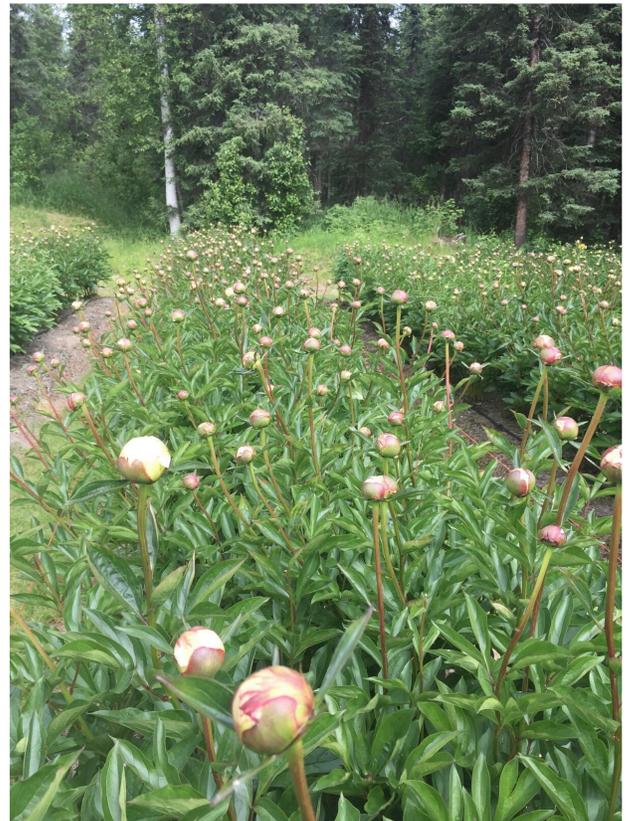


When transferring a potted peony into the ground, it should be easy to plant the peony at soil level, as the potted plant should already be planted to the correct depth in the pot. However, with bare root peonies it's a little trickier. Each root will look different and the eyes may not necessarily be as neatly positioned on the root as expected. In this situation, do your best to get most of the eyes at the correct level and mother nature will work her magic from there.

It's also important to backfill soil under the peony root as needed; there should not be any pockets of air left under the roots which could otherwise cause rot from pooling water or cause the plant to sink too deep in the soil.



SINGLE ROW SPACING



DOUBLE ROW SPACING

PLANING THE LAYOUT

Some growers plant their peonies in single rows while others plant in double rows, and there are tradeoffs to consider for both methods. Double row plantings help maximize the profitability of the space but will likely result in rows that are densely packed and possibly at higher risk for foliar disease due to a lack of air circulation around the plants. Peonies planted in single rows experience improved ventilation, but fewer peony plants will fit within the area overall, depending on the size of the walkways in between each row. In addition, it may be easier to harvest stems from single row plants since the entire plant is reachable from all angles when cutting; however, double row plantings have a fullness that is visually pleasing if you will have visitors to your cutting garden.

Within a row, peonies should be planted with at least two feet between each plant, which sounds like ample room but is very close once the plants mature. It is certain that the leafy foliage of healthy peonies will be touching within the first few years of growth when planted at two-foot increments. For better air circulation between plants, consider planting your peonies further apart as space allows, and offset each plant when growing in double rows. Raised beds should be a minimum of three feet wide so that roots can spread in all directions within the raised growing space, and much wider for double rows.



IRRIGATION

Peony plants are highly susceptible to certain diseases, in particular botrytis spp. which thrive in high humidity, low airflow environments. Because of this, one of the best preventative measures you can take against foliar disease is to drip irrigate your peony plants. The idea of installing irrigation is new to a lot of growers, but there are many affordable and easy-to-use systems on the market which can be set up very quickly and will last for years.

The time that you spend installing drip irrigation will pay dividends in time saved and potential disease mitigation down the road. If you are irrigating on a slope then you'll want to use irrigation line with pressure compensating emitters, so that your plants are watered evenly. If you are on flat ground, simple drip tape is very affordable and, although thin, may last for multiple seasons if holes are mended each spring. Many of the farms in our peony cooperative source their irrigation supplies from Dripworks. Dripworks customer service can provide advice on an irrigation design specific to your growing configuration, and they also have many pre-made kits available for small growers.



YOUNG PLANTS: YEARS 1-3

A peony cutting garden develops slowly, and the plants must be allowed to establish themselves before harvest can be taken. It is normal for a peony plant to flower very little or not at all within the first three years. However disappointing this is to the grower, it can be a good thing for the plant to have time for root growth rather than the development of flower buds, which are technically for reproduction. Many professional growers will remove all of the buds from their plants during their first few years, hoping to encourage robust development of the roots. That said, there can be an argument made for letting one flower open per young plant to confirm that the root you received is true to the cultivar that you ordered from the supplier (if not, make sure to let the root supplier know so they can correct the issue).

MATURE PLANTS: YEARS 4+

Around the fourth year, many growers report that their peony plants really take off. It's an exciting time, as all of the care that has been put into the plants finally begins to show!

Peony plants are usually easy to maintain once established, just remember to perform a few key steps every season:

- Collect an annual soil sample to monitor nutrient availability over time
- Work amendments into the soil as indicated by the soil analysis rather than guessing
- Monitor your plants for disease and pests
- Keep the peonies weeded and well-watered (note: although they do not like to have their roots in standing water, peonies need to be watered thoroughly and regularly).



WHAT'S UP WITH ANTS?

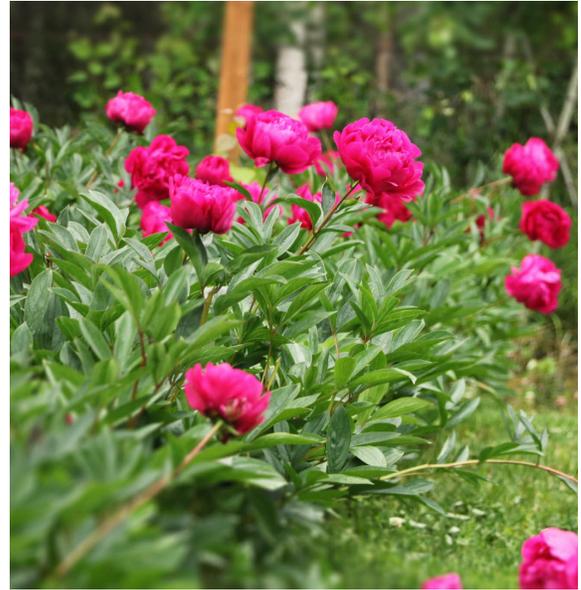
At our peony cooperative, we are asked all of the time about the relationship between ants and peonies. The truth is, ants (like bees) visit the closed peony buds to collect the nectar that is extruded on the outside of the peony bud. The nectar is a source of carbohydrate for the insects that collect it; however, peonies are capable of blooming without the assistance of ants or any other type of insect.

WHICH CULTIVARS ARE RIGHT FOR MY AREA?

There are so many beautiful peony cultivars on the market, how does a grower know which are the best for harvesting? In a few words, it takes research and experimentation. Plant characteristics are usually listed on the websites of root producers, so make sure to look for cultivars that grow tall, have sturdy stems and may already be designated for cut flower production.

CULTIVARS

In general, double form peonies tend to be reliable bloomers on the plant and in the vase, and are good for new growers. Some peonies are a bit more temperamental or delicate than others, so planting a mix of bloom forms and cultivars can be a good strategy. Growers in warm climates may want to select early blooming varieties to ensure that harvest is done by the time summer's high temperatures kick in. In cool climates, growers can try a mix of early, mid and late blooming varieties for a protracted harvest season.



The eleven member-farms of our peony cooperative worked together to compile a guide that describes the peonies which have performed the best for us over time. Specifically, the guide highlights 24 cultivars that can reach the desired stem length necessary to meet USDA standards for commercial stem production, reliably produce a high number of harvestable stems, and those that florists have told us they love. We also describe bloom size, color, and form as well as tips on harvest stage, cooler storage, and vase life. The *Passionate For Peonies Guide* can be downloaded for free from the resources page of our website. We hope that it will become a useful reference tool as you work towards building your very own peony cutting garden.

WHERE CAN I BUY ROOTS?

There are different options for purchasing roots, depending on the size of your cutting garden. For a small and diverse peony collection, there are many peony roots for sale online as well as at local greenhouses. These businesses often feature excellent selections, including new introductions, so this is a good way to find roots that are not usually offered by wholesale root vendors.

We receive a lot of calls and emails to our peony cooperative from growers looking to purchase roots, which we don't sell; however, we are happy to refer to our favorite retail vendors, specifically those businesses that have extensive collections of quality rootstock and provide excellent and prompt customer service. You can find our preferred retail vendor list on the resources page of our website. On a side note, many retail plant nurseries will discount their perennials once the spring planting frenzy has passed, so this may be a perfect time to find locally grown potted peonies at a discount in your area.



Growing a large peony cutting garden allows the grower to benefit from deeply discounted wholesale root pricing. Wholesale peony roots are sold by the crate, which usually hold around 50-60 bare roots each, depending on the size of root that is ordered. In Alaska, we work with those wholesalers willing to navigate the crazy logistical chain that is required to get high-quality roots to the far north, including Oregon Perennial Company, DeVrooman Garden Products, and Peony Shop Holland, to name a few. For growers in the Lower-48, you will likely find a broad selection of wholesale growers who are willing to ship to your area.

From all of the members of the Alaska Peony Cooperative, we wish you the absolute best as you develop your very own peony cutting garden. The work is worth it and the payoff is grand! If you have questions along the way, please drop us an email at sales@alaskapeonycooperative.com, or instant message us on Instagram or Facebook (@alaskapeonycooperative).



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The Alaska Peony Cooperative supports our member-farms through sales, marketing, education and resource sharing. We support the broader peony industry through the creation of educational resources, to share the knowledge our farmers have gained from their peony farming experiences. We invite you to share your favorite peonies with us by using in the hashtag #passionateforpeonies on Instagram, because every day is better with peonies!

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