

Caring for Your Peonies

Peonies are a favorite perennial of gardeners because of their beauty and low maintenance. In Kansas, peonies provide a beautiful display of flowers each spring before Memorial Day. But often people wonder when the right time to cut peonies is. If peony foliage is spotted and no longer attractive, cut it back now. Peonies are essentially dormant by September 1 even though leaves may still be green. Cut leaves off close to the ground and compost or discard avoid any overwintering diseases.

Though peonies can be left in place indefinitely, many gardeners wish to increase their plantings and use a process known as division to accomplish this. Keep in mind, however, that peonies often take about three years to return to full bloom and size after division. Fall is the traditional time to divide these plants. The first step in division is to remove the foliage. Then dig out the entire plant. Shake and wash off as much soil as possible so that the pink buds or "eyes" are visible. Peony roots are tough, and a sharp knife is needed to cut the roots into separate pieces. Make sure each division has three to four buds. Make sure the location chosen for planting receives at least a half-day of full sun. However, the more sun, the better. Space the plants so that there is at least 2 feet between dwarf types and 4 feet between the standard types.

Follow the same rules for planting these divisions as you do for new plants. Make sure the pink buds are about 1 inch below the soil surface. If they are set more than 2 inches deep, flowering may be delayed or completely prevented. As you set the plants, firm the soil often as it is added around the plant by patting the soil with your hands. If the soil is not firmed, it can settle and pull the plant down with it. Water in well after planting and water as necessary through the fall and winter to keep the soil moist.

It is often a good idea to add mulch to the new planting to protect it from heaving. The alternate freezing and thawing that commonly occurs during Kansas winters can "heave" weakly rooted plants out of the ground. Add a mulch of straw, leaves, compost or other material after the soil freezes. Remember, it is not the cold that harms these plants but the alternate freezing and thawing of the soil.

For more information or questions contact the Extension Office at (785) 562-3531 or email anastasia@ksu.edu.