

How to grow Tree Peonies

Patience is required to grow these plants. First flowers may not be true to size and colour. Do not be disappointed; allow one or two seasons to develop. Once they start to bloom, the exotic flower is so rewarding. Tree peonies grow for many years and if cared for will bloom annually. Careful consideration should be given in selecting the location for planting the tree peony. Partial or high-filtered shade will lengthen the life of the blossoms. They should be sheltered from strong winds. They must have good air circulation around the peonies to prevent botrytis.

Planting: Tree peonies must not be spring planted unless well potted. Plant in autumn from containers, from April 15th until November. Select a well-drained place with at least half a day of sunlight. The blooms will last longer if sunlight is filtered during the heat of the day, therefore morning sun is preferred. Tree peonies prefer a high PH 5.5 to 7.0. Most average soils will have a PH of 5.0 to 5.5. In the planting hole that should be 50cm deep, the equivalent of a 25cm(8in) pot of agricultural lime & a pot of a 25cm(8in) Dynamic Lifter or Organic Life, incorporated into the soil. Garden lime (calcium) is a very good soil conditioner and is essential for peonies, as the peony must have high calcium/magnesium content to grow successfully. The amount of lime may seem excessive, but it has been proven to grow the strongest Tree Peonies. After 2 to 3 years of growth, and if the plant is lacking in vigour and not flowering, more lime can be applied in a good layer around the plant. Carefully work the lime on the surface into the surrounding soil. Two to three-year-old divisions planted in Autumn from 8" to 10" pots should flower the following Spring. Surface organic mulch is recommended to moderate soil temperature fluctuations in summer only. Do not mulch too close to the centre of the bush, just around the plant. Plant deeper than the container it comes in, about 2" deeper. (Herbaceous peonies need to be planted shallow, only ½" soil covering crown.)

Feeding: Tree Peonies are gross feeders, they like lots of food to perform the best. Once the ground has been prepared with Organic Life and copious amounts of lime, they can be fed NPK chemical fertilizer, preferably low in N but high in P and K, also give iron in the form of Ferrous sulphate which is readily available. A small handful of each, spread around the base of the plant on Melbourne Cup Day (early November), Anzac Day (mid-April) and also mid-July. Recommended fertilizers are Sudden Impact for Roses or any rose food, Blood & Bone, Sulphate of Potash and trace elements. As for winter feeding, (July 15) Seamungus or a seaweed product can be used.

Culture: In Autumn, when the peony leaves begin to fall, it is advisable to remove them and any other debris, being careful not to damage the plant in any way. Leaves left on the ground could have disease spores that might survive winter and cause infection in the Spring. Whenever the weather is dry, supplementary watering is beneficial. This is also true while they are in bloom. If mulched in Summer, water only in extremely dry conditions, as their root system is basically not active.

Pot culture: If you have very limited space and have a very small garden or patio etc., they can be grown very successfully in pots. The basic requirements are excellent drainage in the form of a quality open potting mix and the addition of 2-3 handfuls of garden lime when re-potting.

Drainage: Good drainage is absolutely essential for Tree Peonies and they will thrive in most garden soils. If sandy, dig in peat moss and well-rotted (not fresh) animal manure and create a well, so water can soak in. With clay or very heavy soils, mound up at least 15-30cm, do not dig down. If the required amount of lime is added, the clay will break up readily. If it is very sticky, a liberal amount of gypsum will also help. N.B. Most Tree Peonies are killed by over watering than under watering. They cannot stand even a day of water logging.

Pruning: Usually it is only necessary to remove dead or broken branches. They should be removed when the growing season starts, so make sure there is no life in these branches. In areas where Tree Peonies are prolific in growth, the centre of the plant should be kept open as possible to allow sunshine and air to circulate to prevent fungal disease and leaf spots. Also remove all the spent flowers when all the petals have fallen off, in late November.

Chlorosis: Due to the addition of lime to increase PH in some soils, the Tree Peonies may take on a chlorotic appearance. The foliage is a yellowish colour and the leaf veins are prominent. This is easily corrected. A month before growth commences in Spring, and once more after, sprinkle a good handful of ferrous sulphate or water in some iron chelate.

Aftercare: After the initial planting, garden lime can be applied around the plant every 3 years. Be generous, 3-4 handfuls or an inch layer is fine. A good indicator of not enough lime is shoots dying back over the winter and tip buds brown and rotted. The plant will survive this and shoot out lower down.

Testing your soil: To make sure your garden soil is correct to grow Tree Peonies, use any PH kit with a colour chart liquid dye and white powder. Get a cube of soil 3cmx3cm, drip 5-6 drops of liquid and puff with the powder, any yellow colouring will indicate acidity. This means not enough lime is present, so add more. Dark colouring means 6.5-7 PH, the correct range of PH for peonies.

Dominic Wong: email:peonyman.23@gmail.com

Mobile phone: 0411 783 883. Facebook: Paeonia Garden @renwicknsw