

Fall Peony Care

In case you have not done so, now is the time to do fall peony care. Here are the steps I take.

1. Cut back your peonies when the plants start to go dormant. The cuttings can carry disease so it is very important that they are disposed of away from your garden. I typically cut the plants back to within one to two inches of the ground.
2. Fertilize your plants. You can use a balanced 10-10-10 type fertilizer or 4-10-8 type mix. Never use a fertilizer that is higher in nitrogen than the other fertilizer components. I like to use organic fertilizer, but non-organic works too. For roots planted in fall 2017, fertilize lightly. I use about 1/3 the amount I use on more mature plants. Also, keep the fertilizer away from the crown of the plant and mix in well with the soil. Water after applying the fertilizer.
3. Check to make sure the plant's eyes are "at or near the surface" of the earth. The eyes are pink or white buds that typically are found under the surface of the earth. The eyes are next year's growth. It is easy to knock off eyes if you are not careful so work slowly and gently.



This picture shows a one year old plant that I just cut back with the eyes at the surface. What you can't see are the four additional eyes right below the surface.

For flowers to produce the following spring, the eyes need winter chill and specifically they need about 480 cumulative hours at or below 46 degrees. I have never had a problem with the plants getting inadequate chill as long as I keep the eyes at or near the surface and follow step 4 below. With inadequate chill you will have healthy plants but no flowers. (Too much shade is the other typical problem with non-flowering plants. Peonies need a minimum of six hours of sunshine.) You'll also find that Internet instructions on planting peonies generally describe methods for colder climates where it is important to have protective earth

around the eyes so that they are not exposed to too much cold. This is not our problem as the story that follows reflects.

Keep the base of the plant clear of mulch, bark, etc. Don't do what I did one year. Since my flower farm is surrounded by open grasslands, weed seeds are everywhere and managing them can be a very time consuming challenge. Some of my plants had a nice layer of leaves around the base. I got the great idea of leaving the leaves there to serve as a natural weed barrier. Well, that worked great and the plants were weed-free and super healthy the following spring, but I had no flowers on those plants – zip, nada, no blooms to be found. What the heck happened?!? Then it dawned on me. The leaves had not only served as a great weed barrier, they had also insulated the roots, not allowing for winter chill. The next year, I removed all of the leaves and the flowers were back in force. Yeah! This little example shows how important the winter chill is in producing beautiful blooms.