



Woody Peony Information

Woody peonies (colloquially known as tree peonies) are very different from herbaceous peonies. They are small, deciduous shrubs and have different requirements when it comes to planting depth and fall clean up.

PLANTING

The most common problem with woody peonies results from incorrect planting depth.

Unlike herbaceous peonies, woody peonies are grafted plants; a small section of tree peony wood has been grafted onto a section of herbaceous peony root. The section of herbaceous peony root is intended to support the woody peony tissue for a few years while it forms its own roots. As such, it is extremely important that sufficient woody peony tissue be in direct contact with the soil so that woody peony roots can develop.

A common mistake is to plant the graft point just below the surface. Planted at such a depth the woody peony never forms its own roots and eventually the herbaceous nurse root either takes over the plant or, withers away leaving the plant with no roots.

When planting a woody peony, look for the bulbous graft point and ensure it is planted at a depth of 10 to 15 cm (4 to 6 inches). This will help ensure the woody peony forms its own roots over time.

Some woody peonies when shipped will already have some of their own roots. And, on occasion, the herbaceous root may have been trimmed back or even completely removed if the woody peony has enough of its own roots at the time of shipping.

To simplify planting, I have marked each peony I ship. **You will find a twist tie or string on the woody peony stem. Plant such that this mark is just below the soil surface.** This will be the appropriate depth for your particular plant. **Remove this once planted, as you'll strangle your plant otherwise.**



FALL CLEAN UP

Unlike herbaceous peonies, woody peonies should not be cut down in the fall. They are deciduous shrubs. When the leaves fall late in the season they should be picked up and removed.

WINTER PROTECTION

Woody peonies are generally considered hardy to Zone 4 but in Zones 4 and 5 they require some winter protection if they are to flower reliably. Protect them as you would a tender rose.

Smaller plants can easily be protected with a Styrofoam rose cone placed over the plant just after the ground freezes.

Larger plants require a bit more work and creativity. Whatever structure is used, it is important that it not be deployed until the foliage has fallen and that the branches do not become encased in soggy organic matter. Pine needles make an excellent insulation material as they do not pack down nor do they easily become soggy. Dry leaves work well but only if the structure is such that they stay dry.

PRUNING

Ensuring appropriate planting depth and fertile soil will help ensure that the woody peony develops a well branched structure so that pruning for shape is not usually required. Some maintenance pruning however may be required. In early spring when the plant begins to show signs of growth, cut out any dead canes and trim back any that are damaged.

In the unfortunate case when all the canes die back during a difficult winter, all is not lost. Though there will likely be no flowers that year, chances are that new shoots will appear and leaf out. Consider adding or improving winter protection for subsequent years.