

Peonies Not Blooming?

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

Peonies are a long lived perennial flower with big showy blooms that usually occur in May. These popular flowers have been around since the 19th century and it seemed that every farmstead across the country had at least a few peony “bushes”. Many a country cemetery could be counted on to have many peonies planted by family burial markers as they often bloomed just around Memorial Day. I personally have one peony plant that came from one that my Grandmother planted on the family farm in Nebraska in the early 1900s. Many abandoned farmsteads still sprout peonies in full bloom after years with little or no care.

Regularly I will hear from homeowners whose peonies are not blooming or blooming very poorly. Invariably they blame this on a lack of ants because those that aren't blooming don't have ants. Cause and effect in action, but they've just got it turned around. When peony buds start to develop and grow they exude a sticky sap that is high in sugars. The ants are present to gather this exudate as a food source. The plants that aren't blooming don't have buds creating this sweet nectar so the ants ignore them.

So why do peonies not bloom or start to bloom less? First of all let's assume that they are in full sunlight (they don't do well in the shade, even light shade) and that they are fertilized once or twice a year. If there are a lot of tree or shrub roots in the soil then this competition for water and nutrients can also have an impact. The main reason that peonies don't bloom is because the eyes, or new growth buds, on the crown (tubers) of the plants are too deep in the soil. When you plant peonies you want to make sure that these eyes are at least one inch deep but not more than two inches deep.

But why then, when they have been blooming so well for several years do the flower numbers and size start to decrease? There are two possible reasons. First of all, if you've cut your peonies off in the fall and looked at the base of the plant you may notice that it has sort of mounded up. Soil can blow or filter in and collect around the stems. Leaves and other dead plant material can settle in there and over time it just starts to build up depth burying the eyes too deep. If you catch this fairly early a lot of times you can rake that soil off in the fall and level it back down. If a couple of years of doing this doesn't help, you will need to dig the plants up and reset them to the proper depth.

Another problem that can plague peonies is premature removal of leaves. Once the peonies finish blooming each spring you should cut off the spent flower buds so the plants don't waste energy trying to develop seeds. Then you leave the foliage on the plants through about the end of August. During this time the plants are building up the food reserves in the tubers or crowns of the plants. These food reserves are what the plant will initiate growth on in the spring. This is also the time that the plant is making new eyes that will grow and develop flowers next spring. If you go in right after blooming and mow them off, the plant doesn't have a chance to develop new eyes nor store up the food it requires for that early season growth.

You also need to be careful to fertilize once in the fall after top growth removal and again in the spring about the time new growth starts. Sprinkle a balanced fertilizer in a band around the outside the edge of the plant so you don't burn the new growth as it emerges.