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## **Dividing Peonies**

Peonies are popular and widely grown perennial flowering plants. They produce an outstanding springtime floral display of large, fragrant blossoms. After the flowers have faded the peonies remain attractive foliage plants; they can be use in the landscape similar to low-growing shrubs.

Unlike many other perennial flowers which play out after two or three years, peonies will remain productive for many years. However, in time peony crowns also become crowded and this may affect the quality and quantity of blossoms they produce. When this occurs it's time to divide the plants.

Dividing peonies can be done in the fall after the foliage has died back, or very early in the spring before new growth begins. It's important that the soil is moist enough to crumble easily before attempting to dig up the crowns. If the soil is too dry the peony bed should be thoroughly irrigated several days beforehand.

First, remove all the above ground parts of the peony plants. Stems should be cut short; an inch or two above the soil line is about right. Do not dig closer than one foot from the center of the peony crown. Dig a deep trench all the way around the plant, and then loosen the root ball with a gentle, upward lift from the outside edge of the root ball. Avoid applying excessive force to minimize root breakage. Carefully work from all slides of the root ball until it is loose and moves freely in the hole.

Next, remove the soil from the crown and roots. Separate the roots, cutting them into suitably sized sections for transplanting (a pruning shears helps to cut the thick roots). Each root division for replanting must have a section of stem attached at the top end. This stem portion contains large, plumb buds (called eyes) which will produce the new shoots for the next growing season.

When replanting the peony division, ensure that the stem eyes are set just below the soil line (at approximately the same depth they were prior to digging). Planting peony roots too deep can slow the plant's growth and flowering for several years. Thoroughly irrigate the peony bed immediately after transplanting to settle the soil around the roots.

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