

SUSTAIN PEONIES' FLEETING BEAUTY

> They've been asking for them all year — brides and party planners pine for peonies regardless of Mother Nature's timing. But now, the much-desired, oft-requested peony is in season and it's your job to make the most of its limited performance.

You won't be lacking for choices in leading performers. Cultivars come in a wide range of colors including white, ivory/cream, pink, yellow, red, rose, salmon and maroon. Flowers come in an array of forms including single, semi-double, double, Japanese (single, with large yellow centers), and anemone-type blossoms. The most common cut peonies sold in the United States are the double flower types. Most varieties are fragrant, adding to their irresistible appeal.

Right Time To Buy

Domestic peonies grown in the U.S. and Canada bloom from March through August, but they peak from April to June. (Fresh-cut peonies are available other times of the year from outside the U.S., so check with suppliers.) We highly recommend scheduling delivery of peonies two or three days prior to your event to allow for proper hydration and flower opening. Vase life is short, usually lasting between two to seven days. That's long enough to get you through an event, but leaves little wiggle room. Post-harvest care is critical to get the most out of these ephemeral beauties.

Opening Right Jitters

Peonies need to be harvested at the proper stage of development for ease of storage, transport and proper flower opening. Most varieties are cut in a tight-bud stage, with slight color visible. Harvest standards can vary, however, among cultivars. Peonies can be cold-stored after harvest at 32°F for four to six weeks prior to market if disease is controlled adequately.

When they get to your shop, peony buds should be in a "puffy" stage where the buds are colored, but not open. Don't buy peonies with open flowers, as you'll likely experience a shortened vase life and petal bruising. Also avoid stems with excessively tight buds and no color, as they may never open.



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EPHEMERAL ELEGANCE Make the most of the oft-requested peony's short season and vase life with proper processing.

Peonies are susceptible to *Botrytis* (gray mold), especially if stored wet or if not pre-treated with fungicides. *Botrytis* thrives in dark, moist environments, like those found in shipping boxes. So carefully check for any signs of *Botrytis* infections when buying or when flowers arrive at your shop.

You can hold stems in a cooler at arrival if the buds are still tight, no flowers have opened and they are free of disease. Keep stems dry in the box and maintain the temperature at 33°F to 35°F. If the stems were stored for more than four weeks prior to market, process as soon as possible. If stems were freshly cut, you can keep dry in cold storage for up to three weeks. Opened blooms, however, must be placed into solution immediately upon arrival. If unsure of storage time, process within a few days.

Discard any stems that have damage or evidence of *Botrytis* infection. Remove the bottom-most leaves that will be submerged in solution. Cut at least one-inch off the bottom of the stem with a clean, sharp blade or pruner. Place immediately into a clean, sterilized container with a freshly made commercial hydration solution. The hydration solution will aid in water absorption after dry storage.

Depending on the variety and stage of development, buds can open within a few hours or a few days once in solution. If you need opening to occur quickly,

transfer stems into a fresh flower food solution a few hours after hydrating and keep at room temperature under high light. If you need to delay flower opening, keep flowers in the hydration solution in a 33°F to 35°F cooler and transfer to flower food in a day or two. Always check solution levels, as peonies are heavy drinkers.

Although peonies do not appear to be sensitive to ethylene, always keep flowers away from sources of the gas.

Show Time

To make flowers last, always use flower food and send some home with your customers. Remind them to keep peonies in the coolest area of the home, church or event space. Flowers will thrive under high light but don't do well with direct sunlight, drafts and warm temperatures. Remind event planners and other customers that if the solution becomes cloudy, clean the container, re-cut stems and place peonies in a fresh flower-food solution. Though relatively short, the life of a peony can be unforgettable, with your help. 🌸

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