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Few spring blooming plants grab the attention of the public like peonies. They grace many home and public landscapes with their large, frilly blooms. Unusually warm weather prompted the peonies to bloom earlier than usual this spring. For anyone who wants to plant or divide peonies, a week or two after Labor Day is an ideal time.

Peonies have been a staple blooming perennial plant in landscapes here for years. They grow and thrive with very little care. Peonies can be found in full bloom on abandoned farmsteads and rural cemeteries found off the beaten path. No wonder they have been a versatile favorite in gardens for so many years.

First, select a location for the new divisions to be planted before digging up the peonies from their original location. The new location should provide at least six hours of direct sunlight to help promote vigorous growth and blooming. Count how many sets of newly divided plants will be put in the new bed. Allow enough space to avoid these plants from crowding. There should be 24 to 36 inches between each of the new plants.

The new planting location should be dug to a depth of two feet to loosen the soil. Add in a two-to- three inch layer of decayed manure or compost into the planting area before planting the newly divided plants.

If you are purchasing bare-root peonies, select divisions that are firm and healthy looking with at least three healthy buds. If you are purchasing a containerized peony, inspect the health of the divisions, the foliage and the number of divisions before purchasing.

When creating peony divisions from existing plants, water the bed where the established peonies are currently growing for a few days before attempting to dig. Open up the soil to a depth of eight inches all around the plant that will be divided. These steps will help loosen the soil, and hopefully reduce damage to the roots when the plant is dug up. After this is done, carefully dig up the plant out of the ground.

Cut the plant foliage off of existing plants that will be divided to a height of one inch above the plant buds with a clean knife. The buds are usually red or pink in color found at the base of the foliage. Rinse the soil from the roots with a gentle stream of water to expose the roots and the locations of the buds. Divide the main plant into sections with three to five healthy buds and corresponding roots with a clean, sharp knife or spade. Remove any diseased or damaged roots at this point.

Transfer the containerized plants or plant divisions to the new planting area that has been prepared in advance. Lay the divisions out in the bed to ensure a space of 24 to 36 inches between plants before digging and planting the peonies in the ground. Peonies will need to be planted at a shallow depth to promote vigorous growth and blooming. Do not plant the buds more than one or two inches below the soil. Planting the divisions right below the surface will help avoid straggly growth and few, if any, blooms.

Fill the soil back around the newly planted divisions thoroughly to avoid air pockets around the roots. Water the newly planted divisions thoroughly. Apply two to three inches of organic matter on the newly planted bed to retain moisture and winter protection. Do not fertilize peonies in the fall. This is done in the spring by applying one-half cup of 10-10-10 fertilizer around the crown of each plant, and incorporated in the soils six inches deep.

If you have any questions about dividing and transplanting peonies, please contact me at david.lott@unl.edu, by calling (308) 532-2683, or by contacting your local University of Nebraska-Lincoln Extension Office.