



Lush flower beds surround Kingfisher Cottage.

Peony Perfection

By Gloria Hildebrandt

PHOTOS BY MIKE DAVIES

David Warburton’s garden in Hockley Valley is enchanting. A professional plantsman, landscape designer and nursery owner, Warburton has made peonies one of his specialties. His annual Peony Festival, scheduled this year for June 21 and 22, is the perfect excuse to explore his fabulous flower beds.



Peony “Nympe”

Right from the massive timber arch at the driveway entrance, past the new straw bale building, the grounds are a delight. Lush gardens seem to go on endlessly, surrounding his residence, built in Storybook architectural

style and named Kingfisher Cottage. A lazy creek meanders along a laneway of the property.

Punctuating the gardens are cedar structures including an arbor covered with vines and a bridge leading to a platform with benches. The garden paths curve and wind

All photos taken in David Warburton’s garden



Peony "Paula Fay"



Tree peony unnamed Lemon Yellow

through the beds, fully planted with flowers of all description. In late June, the peony reigns here as queen, rewarding the visitor with splashes of various colours and shapes at every turn.

"There are thousands of peony cultivars now," says Warburton. "They keep hybridizing them. Flowers come and go in vogue and fashion but the peony is almost always a favourite. They're hardy, generous with blooms and give so much for so little."

From 30 to 50 different varieties of peonies will be for sale at the peony festival, in large containers with good root balls, ready for planting.

Curving path leads to a vine-covered arbor.

Cedar bridge and resting platform spans the garden's creek.



Peony "Coral Charm"

roots have a great corm or tuber and transplants should have at least three incipient buds or "eyes" and be planted in a very large hole.

Peonies like full sun but their blooms last a bit longer in afternoon shade. Plant the corms no more than two inches below the soil surface.

"Tug the plant up a little after planting," is one of Warburton's secrets.

He recommends feeding peonies nitrogen and trace minerals a couple of times before they set buds, and then to hold back the nitrogen so they flower instead of producing too many leaves. Peonies should be deadheaded and the stems cut back to the leaves after blooming. At this time they can be fed minerals.

Green leaves should be left for the energy to return to the plant roots. In the fall they can be given a half strength of full feed. Only when the plant has collapsed should it be cut back for winter, and dead leaves removed to prevent disease. These leaves should not be added to the garden compost.

Support the Blooms

Top-heavy peonies may keel over under their weight of blooms and begin rotting in contact with the ground. To get the most out of the blooms, peonies may need support. Warburton points out that some, like the "America" that he grows, is beautifully self supporting.

For the others, he advises investing in strong peony rings that have adjustable heights and widths. When the peony is a foot tall, place the ring around it at the height you think it will reach. The ring can always be pulled up higher as the plant grows.

"Any decent-sized nursery should have many grades of rings," says Warburton. "Lee Valley has a good ring. Or you could always use twiggy sticks planted close to the stems."

Warburton's Peony Festival will offer peonies and everything related to them, from potted plants for the garden to peony-themed art and crafts for the home. For more information on the Peony Festival, see www.tillingthesoul.com or call 1 888 860 6065. ■

Garden Bed Design

To get the lush look of Warburton's gardens, plan your beds around the peony plants. He recommends planting each one so that it's fully visible and unimpeded.

"Leave room so they can present themselves," he advises. "There's a rhyme that really applies to peonies. The first year they sleep, the second year they creep, the third year they leap."

Since peonies bloom in June, Warburton suggests grouping them together with other flowers of this time, such as poppies and irises. Plants in the colours of silver and blue also go well with peonies.

Care and Feeding

It's true that peonies don't like to be moved, so if digging one up, it's good to get a very big root ball. Transplanting in early fall is best, as the peony roots may easily fall apart into divisions at that time. Planting can still be done in spring, especially if the root ball is large enough. Peony



Peony "Festiva Maxima"

Peony "America"

