



Dear Dr. Fill

One of my favourite flowers is the **peony**, but I don't like the way my older clumps all seem to flop over when they bloom. Some of the stems are supported inside my peony rings, but some new branches pop up outside the ring and I can't figure out how to add another ring to hold those blooms up, and I can't bend those stems to go inside the ring without snapping them off. Is there a way to add a second ring or is there some nutrient that I need to add to my soil to strengthen their stems? Any help will be appreciated. I'm afraid to divide my really large clumps that have been blooming so well for years as I've read that they don't like to be moved.

**Sincerely,
Tired of Floppy Flowers**



Dear Tired of Floppy Flowers

There's possibly no more perfect flower than a peony – they're relatively easy to care for, their scent is heavenly and those big fluffy blossoms are absolute perfection... well... until it rains... or there's a breeze anywhere in your neighbourhood... or a passerby sneezes or creates a draft that knocks the flowers down... Most gardeners will tell you that when they see their peonies about to peak, they know there's going to be a wind and rain storm arriving very soon! It just seems inevitable that those gorgeous blooms end up sagging down onto

the ground due to some bad weather.

Your first option you mentioned was to dig up your large clumps and split them so that they will fit inside your peony cages. This could work if you do it in the fall, but you'll likely lose a few seasons of bloom, and peonies are not the easiest plants to divide. And there's not much that's more impressive than a really mature large peony clump. If it were me, I'd opt for a way to support the heavy blooms, or... dig deep into my wallet and buy some of the new peonies that don't flop.

Peony cages are supposed to help, but they're not perfect. So it's no wonder that we all end up wondering if it's too much to ask that a plant stands up straight?

As it turns out, there are peonies that do stand up – but many of us keep growing the ones that flop! Hybridizers have created some amazing new varieties, but many gardeners can't seem to get rid of those old favourite varieties that have been around for a hundred years. One magazine article I read recently said that there are nearly 5000 strong upright types and only about 150 or so that flop – and I think that those are the only ones that I have in my yard – and it sounds like it's what you have in your yard too!

The obvious question is why did the early breeders continue creating over 100 varieties that all flopped. It turns out there's a very good reason! When those common varieties were first bred in the late 1800s and early 1900's, they

were in huge demand as cut flowers among the very wealthy members of society. Long stems were highly sought after for the tall vases that were in fashion at the time. They held them upright and no one cared if they flopped while they were in the garden! They were also typically grown in conservatories (glass buildings we would now call greenhouses) so there was no concern at all about rain or wind. No one cared if the stems weren't sturdy – they didn't need to be! They were bred to have huge, heavy blooms and a nice scent – and to look good in a vase – nothing else mattered.

As gardening became more popular through the 1900's people wanted to grow peonies in their own gardens. It soon became evident that they needed to be staked, and for decades, gardeners just accepted the idea that if you grow peonies, you need to tie them to a stake of some sort. Someone invented the peony ring and this belief continued among most gardeners. But true lovers of peonies weren't about to go along with this idea. Peony societies began popping up in many larger cities where breeders met and shared their knowledge and their determination to breed peonies that didn't need to be supported. The American Peony Society, for example, was established in 1903, and their mission was largely to promote the development of peonies that don't flop! They bred peonies like 'Krinkled White' that doesn't need staking.

The problem is that the newer sturdier varieties are more expensive. Even

today, the average peony sold in garden centers is a pre-20th century variety that is mass-produced in China and sold cheaply to garden centres all over the world. It's hard to beat their low prices and if we aren't aware that we don't have to settle for floppy plants, we often aren't willing to put the more expensive peony in our shopping cart! If you're wondering why China hasn't begun to grow new ones that are sturdier, my best guess would be that they don't see any need to. We keep buying millions of the ones that flop so they keep growing that same stock.

Some gardeners who grew tired of the flopping ones decided to grow the single varieties rather than those gorgeous double ones, assuming that the blooms would be less heavy, and therefore flop less. It's true that the double varieties do have heavier flowers, but it's also true that those gardeners didn't have to grow only single varieties; breeders have been making double varieties with very strong stems for many years now.

If you're in the market for some peonies this spring, here's a list of some of the ones you're sure to see on the shelf at garden centres. You might be surprised to see that all of our popular varieties have been around for a hundred years! The number in brackets tells you the year they were brought to market, and yes... these are ALL VERY FLOPPY! And if you currently have peonies in your gardens, there's a good chance you are growing at least one of these! 'Alexandre Dumas' (1862), Félix Crousse' ('Victor Hugo')

(1881), 'Jeanne d'Arc' (1858) 'Karl Rosenfeld' (1908) Sarah Bernhardt' (1869) Alexander Fleming (1901) 'Madame Édouard Doriat' (1924)

So what's the alternative? For some reason, there is one peony, 'Bowl of Beauty' which is fairly easy to find in garden centres and which has fairly sturdy stems. Aside from that one, you might need to look on line, or take a list of peonies that you would like to grow to your nursery and ask them to bring them in. . If you want to stick with the traditional peony lactiflora, here are a few that you may find in stores that are much sturdier than the older varieties: 'Alexander Woolcott', 'Athena' , 'Big Ben', 'Blaze', 'Claire de Lune', 'First Arrival', 'Julia Rose', 'Krinkled White' and 'Nice Gal' would all be good choices.

Whether you're shopping on line or in a nursery, look for words on the label or in the catalogue description such as "sturdy stems", "strong stems", and no staking needed. If you are a real peony lover and you would like to check out some on-line mail order sources for peonies in Canada, check out Dutch Girl Peonies(in B.C.), Pivoines Capano (Quebec) and Parkland Perennials (in Alberta). Parkland only ships peony roots in the fall when they are dormant, which is actually the best time to plant them.

In recent years, the Itoh peonies (crosses between herbaceous peonies and tree peonies) have begun to show up in local stores and they have much stronger stems than the older varieties, so those

who grow them say they are certainly worth the extra cost. There have been several articles about Itoh peonies in past issues of the newsletter, and they are certainly worth checking out if you don't already grow them.

And of course, if you have the older traditional peonies, early spring is the time to insert your peony cages – when the plant is about a foot tall. Too many gardeners wait until the peony is growing and ready to bloom and at that point, it's very difficult to insert the cage without damaging the plant. And as you said, you're almost certain to have some stems popping up outside the cage which are sure to flop, and adding a second ring is not going to work.

New gardeners might be tempted to use tomato cages to hold up their peonies, but they really are too small. You'll also see peony rings at the dollar stores – they typically have a round wire ring and 3 wire "legs" that you can slide around the circle and insert into the ground. This design is actually not bad, but inexpensive ones are typically far too flimsy to support the heavy blooms of a healthy peony bush. They will bend and break in no time, and they are also far too short. They seem fine when you place them early in the spring, but as your peony grows, you'll realize that there isn't any support at all high enough up the plant to actually hold the blooms. If you like this style, look for them at a good nursery where the wire is MUCH thicker and the legs are longer.

Another way to support peonies is to insert thin

metal stakes into the ground and simply wrap jute rope around the stakes and around the entire plant. As the peony grows larger and larger over the years, you can simply move the stakes farther from the centre. This system works well for the older, large clumps which you described.

If you have peony rings that you no longer use because you've moved to the "staking" system, remember that those peony rings aren't just for peonies. They are wonderful for supporting tall plants such as Monkshood and highly recommended for the new bush style clematis which don't climb and which need support for their blooms. Most rings now are covered in green vinyl so they become almost invisible when supporting a healthy large plant.

I'll also add a word of caution about tree peonies. Many gardeners remove what appear to be tall dead stems in the spring and assume that they've been winter killed. It can take a LONG time for those tall stems to green up and for buds to appear. (If they haven't started to bud by mid summer, it's safe to assume they're dead! But too often we're removing all of the gorgeous blooms that we would have had if we hadn't been so fast to get out our pruners!)

I hope one of these tips works for you. There truly are no flowers that we can grow in this Zone that can rival a peony for sheer beauty.

Thanks for the great question, and as always, happy gardening! Peony season will soon be here!

**Sincerely,
Dr. Fill**