

# The Green Scene

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## Bleached Flowers on Lilac

By Aaron Steil, Department of Horticulture

Lilacs started to bloom across the state this week, and we have been receiving several questions this year that sound something like this: “Why does my lilac have white or creamy-colored flowers this spring instead of the normal purple or pink?”

Many plants, including lilacs, will have flowers that change color as they age. Pink or purple flowers can fade over time to very light pink/purple (almost white) or a peachy yellow. For many seeing bleached flowers this spring, it is not developing as the flowers age. Instead, it appears to be bleached color from the moment the flowers open. The pH of the soil can also influence bloom color in some plants, like bigleaf hydrangea. Lilac does not respond to soil pH this way. This phenomenon appears to be happening to lilac shrubs growing in a wide range of soil types.

Extreme weather can also influence flower color. Intense heat (which much of the state had earlier this month) can change pink or purple flowers to a yellow or white color. The anthocyanin pigment that contributes to much of the red coloration you see in plants is easily broken down by heat. We suspect the rapid and rather intense heat at a specific time in the development of the flowers caused the blooms to open a yellow/white color instead of the typical pink or purple.

There is nothing you can do to fix the problem, and it does not threaten the overall health of the shrub. Provided that the same weather conditions don't happen next year, the shrub should bloom its typical color next season.

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# Peony Types

By Cindy Haynes, Department of Horticulture

Peonies are popular garden perennials. While they bloom for a short time in spring, they are revered by many gardeners for their fragrant and beautiful flowers and longevity in the landscape. There are several species of peonies that perform well in Iowa and across the Midwest.

**Herbaceous Peonies** (*Paeonia latiflora* hybrids) are the staple peony in the garden. Herbaceous peonies typically die back to the ground every winter. Flower colors include white, pink, peach, red/burgundy, and lavender. The common herbaceous peony is also available with different flower forms: single, semi-double, double, Japanese/Anemone, and bomb. The different flower forms are based on the number of petals and the absence of pollen. The flowers are often so large that they flop to the ground from their sheer weight unless supports are used. Herbaceous peonies are often 2 to 3 feet tall.

**Fern-Leaf Peonies** (*Paeonia tenuifolia*) are also herbaceous peonies, but they are noted for the fine, dissected foliage. Flowers are single or double and often only available in a dark red/burgundy color. This delicate foliage texture contrasts nicely with the bold blossoms. Fern-leaf peonies are typically the first peonies to flower. Fern-leaf peonies are often the smallest peony types, rarely reaching more than 2 feet tall.

**Tree Peonies** (*Paeonia suffruticosa*) are woody shrubs (not trees) in the home landscape. Unlike the other peony types, they produce woody stems that survive above the ground over winter. Tree peonies reach about 3 to 5 feet in height in the Midwest. Tree peony flowers are available in the widest range of colors, including white, pink, red, lavender, yellow, peach, and green. Flowers of tree peonies are also vary large, often reaching 6 to 9 inches in diameter. Most tree peonies have semi-double to double flowers, but the flowers don't flop like herbaceous peonies since the stems offer more support. Tree peonies typically bloom before the common herbaceous peony.

**Hybrid Peonies** exist between tree peonies and the common herbaceous peonies. These hybrids are often called Intersectional hybrids or Itoh peonies (after Japanese hybridizer Toichi Itoh). Itoh peonies often die back to the ground each winter like herbaceous peonies. In the spring, the tree-peony-like foliage is followed by large, colorful flowers. The flowers and flowers colors closely resemble tree peonies. These peonies start blooming as the common herbaceous peonies are starting to fade. Below are a few of the popular Itoh peonies available on the market.

Spring is often the best time to plant peonies. They are readily available to local garden centers and often bloom well in containers. Herbaceous peonies are the least expensive as they are easier to grow and propagate. Fern-leaf, tree, and hybrid types are often more expensive but well worth the cost as the plants are long lived. Peony plants typically last for generations.



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