

***Paeonia lactiflora* Pall.**

Ranunculaceae

Source: báisháo / chìsháo 白芍, 赤芍
peony root



Summary Description

This full sun, herbaceous, long-lived perennial is the true Chinese species from which most U.S. ornamental peonies are derived. The first cultivars were imported from France in the mid-nineteenth century. The species bears both pink and white flowers on the same plant, which colors extend to the roots and buds. The species bears plentiful seed while most cultivars do not. Roots of an ornamental cultivar may be perfumed or have a flavor unlike the species, thus are inappropriate. The literature regarding the sources of Bai Shao and Chi Shao is confusing, but both come from the same plant, being peeled and unpeeled roots. Hardy to Zone 5 at least, the plant flowers in late May to mid-June.

Propagation

Two methods of propagation are used. See the harvest section below for vegetative propagation. For seed germination, harvest fresh seeds when the seed pods begin to open in August. The seeds will be various shades of brown. Black seeds have gone into dormancy; germination will take two years instead of one. Fresh seeds go into warm stratification (70F) immediately for three months, then into cold (40F) for another three months. With this treatment, both roots and shoots will emerge from a satisfactory number of seeds. Plant into 50-cell deep trays with the seed at the soil surface, the root below and the tiny shoot above. Hold the flat in the greenhouse until threat of frost has passed, then set out under part shade and keep moist. Transplant to quart pots in the autumn and winter over above freezing in a protected space. Plant out the following spring.

Cultivation

Peony seedlings should be planted in average, well-drained soil with the crown at the surface; buds will form on the crown starting late in the second year. You may dead-head the flower buds to stimulate root growth. Collect seeds starting in year three or four. Keep the plants mulched with straw or leaves. In autumn, cut withered leaf shoots and compost them. Spread mulch over the crowns but remove it in spring so the buds are at the surface.

Harvest & Processing

Dig plants in year five or more; the longer they grow, the bigger the roots. Divide the crowns so that 2-3 buds remain with each piece along with several root stubs. Plant divisions immediately, ideally in a fresh space. Use larger roots (3/4ths-inch diameter at least) for Bai Shao. Wash (scrub) and peel like a carrot or parsnip, cut oblique slices, spread out to dry. Smaller roots for Chi Shao remain unpeeled, cut and spread out to dry. Drying temperatures should not exceed 100F; dry until the pieces break cleanly. Chi Shao may be cut and/or graded to produce regularly sized decoction pieces.

References

Flora of China: http://www.efloras.org/florataxon.aspx?flora_id=2&taxon_id=200008034s
Bensky *Materia Medica* pages: 752, 622



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