



# Flower Gardening Myths

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I looked at my single beautiful red peony and wondered why I don't do as well with peonies as do others. Some folks say you need to have ants on the buds to help open them up. Being curious, I decided to do some research. Turns out this is a myth or "old wives' tale" as are some others I came across.

Ants on peonies help the buds open: According to peonies.org and other websites, having ants on your peonies probably doesn't harm them, but doesn't help. Apparently peonies produce small amounts of nectar before buds open that attract ants. Once the buds open and the plants stop producing the nectars, the ants retreat. If you spray the plants with pesticide, the residue might be more harmful than the ants. I'll have to search elsewhere for a solution to my peony problem.

Pot fragments or gravel in the bottom of containers improves drainage: Many folks think a layer of gravel or pot fragments in the bottom of containers lets excess water drain freely since water drains more quickly through coarse materials. This was the theory in the Albuquerque neighborhood I grew up in. However, the Guardian website reports, "Research by soil scientists shows that water doesn't flow freely from fine-textured materials into coarser ones. Water moves into coarser materials, such as gravel or corks, only once the soil above is saturated, so a sudden change from a fine to a coarse texture causes water to collect in the soil above, rather than drain away." They suggest making sure the container has drainage holes and note that a gravel layer reduces the volume of soil available to plant roots.

Lighten clay soil with sand: We'd all like nice, loamy soil -- soil that is easy to work and holds water and air without becoming soggy. We have both clay and sandy areas in our yard. Many years ago I'd heard that mixing the two would give me better soil. A few experiments showed me that it didn't work. The Colorado State Extension says that clay plus sand (when mixed with water) equals concrete. Instead of lightening the soil, you'll create a rock-hard "growing" medium. They recommend adding organic matter to break up the soil, add nutrients and encourage proper drainage.

Buried banana peels are good for roses: Bananas are great for boosting the body's potassium, but they're not very good at helping plants. According to the gardening experts at This Old House, buried banana peels steal the nitrogen that plants need to green up. As soil microorganisms work to break down the peels, they extract significant amounts of nitrogen from the soil, which results in less nitrogen for greening up plants. Composting the peels is a better idea.

Sprinkling coffee grounds around acid-loving shrubs lowers the soil's pH: Coffee grounds are acidic, and mixing them into the soil can affect pH—slowly. Jeff Gillman of This Old House magazine says, "Here's the catch: fresh coffee grounds can inhibit plant growth because they tie up nitrogen in the soil as they decompose (just like banana peels), especially if large quantities are added." To lower your soil's pH

without causing a nitrogen deficiency, purchase a sulfur-based soil acidifier from a local garden center.

Overhead watering on a sunny day can scorch leaves: There are good reasons to avoid watering your garden on a sunny afternoon, but causing scorched leaves isn't one of them. "The myth that water droplets act like tiny magnifying glasses and burn plant leaves has no basis in fact," reports the Gardener's Supply website. "And anyone who has watched the sun come out after a summer shower knows that the water quickly evaporates. Leaf damage can be caused by all sorts of things: too much or too little soil moisture, fertilizer burn from improperly diluted synthetic fertilizer, insect or disease problems, and weather conditions, such as wind or frost, to name a few." Try to avoid watering on sunny afternoons to minimize the amount of moisture lost to evaporation, but don't worry about leaf scorch.

Hostas are a shade plant, and don't tolerate sun: This is what I thought! But Don Engebretson, on his RenegadeGardener.com website says that is not quite correct. "Some hostas need some direct sunlight in order to look their best," he says. "In deep shade, just about any hosta will grow smaller leaves, develop more slowly, and lack zip. Most like a little direct sunlight during the day to look their best. This is especially true of those with yellow or gold leaves, which need, and easily tolerate, upwards to three hours of direct sun to develop rich color."

Gardening is a continual process of learning!

*"If you have a garden and a library, you have everything you need."*  
Marcus Tullius Cicero