



Let peony foliage stand through summer and fall, but cut it back after the first frost to help prevent peony botrytis blight.

Cutting Back Peonies

Q. When can peony foliage be cut back?

*Gregg Conrad
Burbank, South Dakota*

A. Herbaceous peonies produce lovely, fragrant flowers in late spring and early summer. Many varieties put on a second show in autumn when their attractive, upright foliage turns a beautiful shade of russet red. Leaving a peony's foliage intact through fall adds interest to the garden and allows the plant to photosynthesize and send carbohydrate reserves to its roots, which helps to ensure plenty of flowers the following year.

Peony foliage should be removed before winter, however, because peony botrytis blight—a fungal disease that causes new shoots to mold and disfigures the flowers—overwinters on foliage left in the garden. “Cut the foliage off after the first frost,” recommends Rod Burke, head of horticulture at the Idaho Botanical Garden in Boise. Use sharp pruners to clip the stems at the soil line and toss them into a waste bin, not the compost pile. Tree peonies (*Paeonia suffruticosa*), which are small woody shrubs, can be pruned in the spring if necessary, notes Burke.

Drying Peppers

Q. We have more hot peppers than we can eat. What is the best way to dry them?

*Henry Wright
Las Vegas, New Mexico*

A. “Peppers with thin flesh, like ‘Anaheim’, cayennes, and habaneros, dry best,” says Danise Coon, the program coordinator of the Chile Pepper Institute at New Mexico State University in Las Cruces. “You won’t have good luck trying to dry jalapeños and other peppers with thicker flesh.” In the Southwest, chile peppers are traditionally dried outdoors in the sun, but oven drying provides more consistent results.

Begin by preheating an oven to 150°F. Spread clean, ripe peppers in a single layer on a rimmed baking sheet. Place the sheet on the middle rack in the oven. “Stir the peppers occasionally to ensure that they dry evenly,” recommends Coon. Drying usually takes several hours; the time can vary widely depending on the size and type of pepper. Fully dried peppers will feel light, crumble readily, and have stems that pop off easily.

Remove the dry peppers from the oven and allow them to cool. To make crushed red pepper flakes, put the peppers into a resealable plastic bag. Zip the bag shut and roll over the pods with a rolling pin. For chili powder, Coon suggests grinding the dry peppers in a coffee grinder reserved exclusively for the purpose. When working with hot peppers, protect your hands with latex gloves and be careful not to rub your eyes or face. Consider wearing a dust mask when crushing or grinding especially hot varieties.