

## Botrytis Blight of Peonies

By Susan Camp

The former owners of our house planted two herbaceous peonies (*Paeonia lactiflora*) in the front garden. The spring after we moved in, we added three more. For over twenty years, the five peonies bloomed and faded and died back, thriving on benign neglect. They were the least troublesome of our many plants. We enjoyed the graceful, short-lived blossoms in the spring, and then left them alone for the rest of the year.

When we started the garden renovation in 2013, we dug the peonies up, potted them, and forgot about them until the fall of 2015. Out of the original five, we had developed fifteen healthy-looking rhizomes, which we planted in a large bed. Early last spring, fourteen plants emerged, so we purchased one small peony (*P. lactiflora* ‘Shirley Temple’) to fill the empty space. The new plant budded and showed several dainty, pinkish-white blossoms. About a week later we noticed that the stems were turning brown and drooping and the once-glossy leaves were splotchy. I cut the plant to the ground, sprayed it with my trusty Neem oil, and hoped the other plants wouldn’t be affected.

Fortunately, I did the right things. My peony has a fungal disease called Botrytis blight or gray mold, caused by a species-specific fungus named *Botrytis paeoniae*. Botrytis blight strikes during rainy spring weather and infects the young shoots as they push through the soil. The emerging shoots look fine, and then suddenly fall over. The younger buds turn black and dry up. Later, mature buds develop fuzzy, gray-brown masses, which are the fungal spores. Blooms may be stunted and the leaves develop brown spots. If the peony plant is not cut back, black, sausage-shaped structures called sclerotia will develop at the bases of the infected shoots. The fungus overwinters in the sclerotia stage, ready to attack the baby shoots next spring.

According to Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) Publication 450-602 “Botrytis Blight of Peony”, the symptoms of Botrytis blight sometimes are mistaken for infestation by thrips, which are tiny, orange, sucking insects. Thrips can be identified by shaking a blossom onto a sheet of white paper.

Botrytis blight will spread to uninfected peonies and must be dealt with as soon as it is recognized. Prevention, of course, is the best approach. Weekly inspection of plants and removal and disposal of spent flower heads and fallen or diseased leaves is the most effective means of preventing Botrytis blight. If you find a diseased plant, cut it back to the ground or remove it completely and dispose of it by bagging or burning.

The Missouri Botanical Garden article “Botrytis Blight of Peony” recommends several strategies. Remove all stalks and leaves in the fall. Bag or burn the debris; do not compost it. Improve drainage by amending the soil with compost. Never let the plants stand in water. If the plants are crowded, thin them to at least three feet apart to provide good air circulation and plant

in full to part sun. Buy plants from a reputable dealer and look for disease-resistant varieties. Divide only disease-free plants.

The Cornell University College of Agricultural and Life Sciences publication “Botrytis Blight of Peony: *Botrytis paeoniae*” and the Penn State Extension publication “Peony Diseases” both caution against overhead irrigation, spraying, and misting. The Penn State article contains information on several fungal and bacterial diseases of peonies.

All of the publications recommend using a fungicide in early spring, just as the red shoots begin to poke up through the soil. Neem oil, copper, and sulfur formulations are effective, as are some other chemicals. Purchase the right fungicide for Botrytis blight and follow label directions carefully. Gloucester Master Gardeners are available in the Main Library every Tuesday from 11:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. and in the Extension Office at (804) 693-2602 every Thursday between 2:00 p.m. and 3:00 p.m. to help you select the appropriate fungicide to combat this infection.

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