2017 Annual Alaska Peony Conference
26-29 January, 2017 Fairbanks at the Westmark Hotel

Register at:  http://www.alaskapeonyconference.com

Turn to page 3 for more details

OUR MISSION
The mission of the Alaska Peony Growers Association (APGA) is to provide support and assistance to its members in all aspects of growing, processing, transporting and promotion of peony plants and flowers. APGA will advocate for research, reasonable governmental regulation, public and private financial assistance, and technology transfer that supports its members and the commercial peony industry in Alaska. APGA advocates and supports establishment and maintenance of a reputation by its members for the highest quality of our products, reliability in our performance, and integrity in our transactions. APGA will promote peonies grown by its members to the general public and to markets throughout the world, and will publicize and advocate for the Alaska peony industry in general.
The Power of Working Together

By: Martha Lojewski

We say we’d like to play in the same sandbox together, but sometimes that is easier said than done. From the time we are kids on the playground and even now as peony farmers we all try to find our place that makes us comfortable but also productive and valued. I am a struggling introvert at heart, because my mind tries to tell me I’m an extrovert. I want to stay in my comfort zone, but the more I listen to my mind and go beyond that small comfortable place, the more I am thankful I did. I find that taking one small step at a time beyond the comfort zone leads to another step, and another, and before I know it I am writing articles for an APGA newsletter.

The main topic I want to remind all of us about is that together we are stronger, many hands make light work and many other sayings we all know and preach, but do we actually live them? There are so many strong peony farmers in our great state. I know this because I meet you at conferences and I see what has been accomplished, but there is still so much more to accomplish and so much untapped talent. I was not born and raised a farmer, but I have realized during my short time in the venture that successful farmers share three qualities; hard working, stubborn and optimistic. That combination is incredibly powerful, but we also have to work together and share our talents.

I see the peony industry on the brink of really making an impact on the domestic floral market. We have done a great job getting to this point, but how are we going to crest this next bump to start climbing to the true summit? By volunteering at your regional branch of APGA, stepping up to answer the call when Gary Wells asks for volunteers to take on a project, giving time to your local cooperative, sharing your talents with other farmers, writing articles for our newsletters, attending and hosting farm tours, offering to be a test subject for scientific research and discovery – but also following through on your word. The hardest part of this call to action is knowing your limits. Yes, I want everyone to pitch in where they can, but volunteering for something that ultimately pushes you over the edge preventing you from completing the task to the required standard is worse than not volunteering at all. I pour everything I have (and even time I don't have) into starting a cooperative in the Mat Su so we can all benefit, but it all started by offering to help research a small topic.

We must stand together, work together and ship only the best quality stems together. We are only as good as the last box we ship. Together we sell Alaskan peonies, not Billy’s, Bob’s or Jane’s Peonies... Alaskan Peonies. Protect your neighbors good name with a quality product and they’ll do the same for you. Start by finding out what skill you have to offer, take a small step out of your comfort zone and see where it leads you. If you are lucky it leads to another step, and another. And along the way, somehow incredible satisfaction in this sense of belonging to something great sneaks in there, and guess where that leads us...to the top together.
Major Speakers

The Future of Alaskan-grown Peonies and its Share in the World Market
Ko Klaver is the industry representative for APGA and is the owner of Botanical Trading Company.

The Principles of Postharvest Handling of Fresh-cut Flowers with Particular Attention to Peonies
John Dole is Associate Dean and Director of Academic Programs for the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at North Carolina State University.

A History of Commercial PeonyGrowing in Alaska
Pat Holloway is Emerita Faculty at University Alaska Fairbanks.

American Beauty: The Slow Flowers Movement from the Field to the Vase
Debra Prinzing is an author and leading American Grown flower advocate.

Potential Effects of Climate Change on Peony Growers
Nancy Fresco is a Research Professor at University Alaska Fairbanks and Network Coordinator for the Scenarios Network for Alaska and Arctic Planning.

Turn to page 5 for more details
As a Natural Resources Specialist at Fairbanks Soil & Water Conservation District, I have been managing our soil testing and technical assistance programs for the past 5 years. This has coincided with the rapid expansion of the peony growing industry in Alaska. I have done my best to learn the ins and outs of growing peonies and their nutrient and soil requirements. This was not an easy task, because there is little research on these topics for our climate. However, through learning from various local soils experts, and through watching peony growers’ trials and errors in soil/fertilizer management, I have become fairly confident in analyzing soil test results and providing recommendations that will work for each grower.

I have discovered that one of the most important factors for success of a peony farm is choosing a good site and properly preparing the soil. Soils in parts of Alaska tend to be acidic and nutrient poor. This means that they need to be amended and worked before they can produce good agricultural yields. In starting a peony farm, it is very important to work closely with either a Soil & Water Conservation District, the Natural Resources Conservation Service, or University Extension to get your soil tested and get advice about soil preparation. As with any perennial crop, your one good chance to work soil amendments into your field is before you plant. Once those expensive peony roots are in the ground the task of altering the soil environment is far more complex. The following are examples of farms that I have assisted with soil preparation in Interior Alaska.

Healthy peonies growing in soil that has been amended with compost, manure, and organic fertilizers.

One farm I worked with cleared trees in 2013 and got their soil tested, with the goal of planting peonies in 2014. Their initial soil test showed low levels of many key nutrients, including Sulfur, Calcium, Magnesium, Boron, Nitrogen, Phosphorous, and Potassium. The organic matter content and Cation Exchange Capacity were also low, due to the recent bulldozing of stumps and topsoil. This is a common scenario, particularly in Interior Alaska. After the first soil test, I recommended applying compost to the field. This succeeded in raising many of the parameters but Calcium and Magnesium were still low. To address this, I recommended adding Dolomite Lime and tilling it into the soil. With the addition of fertilizer (at a rate based on the soil test), the next soil test showed that all of the parameters were much improved and they were able to successfully plant peonies that had good growth their critical first year.

Sometimes the initial soil test shows that a soil is very acidic, in which case it is best to prepare the soil for a couple seasons before planting peonies. Farmers I worked with in Two Rivers added lime, compost, and grew a cover crop for 2 seasons before planting peonies. In the end, this farm will be much more productive because they took the time to properly prepare the soil first.

It is always disheartening to see farms where the soil was not properly prepared before peonies were planted. I have seen plenty of stunted plants, nutrient deficiencies, nutrient toxicities and other problems stemming from improper soil preparation and under or overuse of fertilizers. Please consult with experts before you plant peonies. Peonies are a long term investment, and with some care and good planning, will produce beautiful flowers for many years into the future.
## Concurrent Sessions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Session</th>
<th>Presenter(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Peony Pest Research</td>
<td>Dr. Beverly Gerdeman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peony Nutrition Research Results</td>
<td>Dr. Minchu Zhang</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-Harvest Handling Problems</td>
<td>Dr. John Dole</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Botrytis Research Results</td>
<td>Dr. Gary Chastegner &amp; Andrea Garfinkel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Herbicides</td>
<td>Dr. Tim Miller</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Webinar on Peony Biomass Use In Deicing</td>
<td>Dr Shi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winter Coverage and Soil Temperatures</td>
<td>Dr. Jill Russell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IPM Project Update</td>
<td>Dr Steve Seefeldt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soil Sampling and Invasive Species</td>
<td>Jessica Guritz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How the Heck Did That Happen - Things That Went Wrong</td>
<td>Dr. Dave Russell &amp; others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peony and Garden Photography</td>
<td>Greg Martin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funding Sources for Peony Ag</td>
<td>Johanna Herron, Brad Robbins &amp; others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why Co-Ops</td>
<td>Andrew Crow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peony Roots</td>
<td>The Weirstras</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What Wholesalers Are Looking For</td>
<td>Joost Bongaerts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing Trade Partner Relationships</td>
<td>Johanna Herron</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing Development for Co-Ops (Limited To Co-Op Bods)</td>
<td>Chris Beks</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Panels:

**Shipping/Transportation**

**Value-Added for the Local Market**
Clearing Land: Lessons Learned

By: Todd Main

I have about 4 acres in Sterling that I decided to clear for possible peony planting. I’ve never had land cleared or quite sure exactly, so I wasn’t quite sure what I needed to do, other than “have it cleared”. Turns out, after a few months of this, there’s more to it than that. Here’s what I learned:

Contractors: First, I needed to find a contractor to do the clearing. I didn’t know any, so had to ask around. As it turns out, there are many, many contractors who can do land-clearing, but the prices vary widely. Some contractors quote $5000/acre, some quote $2500/acre, some quote $150/hour. At one stage, I got two contractors both bidding $2300, so I chose the one I got more references for.

✔ Lesson Learned: It’s good to shop around, get several bids and get references.

Equipment: When asking for bids from contractors, they all stated they would use a dozer to clear the land. Apparently, most/all of the land they clear isn’t for farming purposes, so a dozer does just fine. I do remember hearing that dozers may be a bad idea as they remove a lot of the top soil, which doesn’t leave peonies with much healthy soil to grow in. So I had to ensure that the contractor was going to use less-damaging ways to clear the land, like use an excavator with a thumb to “pluck” all my ugly beetle-killed black spruce trees.

✔ Lesson Learned: I was lucky enough to remember that I needed a way to try to keep organics on the land, so I was able to ask the contractor to use other equipment.

Burning: About 3 weeks into clearing (my contractor was a single person who wasn’t putting in 8 hours a day), my contractor asked me what I wanted to do with all the trees. I assumed that he was going to take care of them, as part of our deal. Turns out that wasn’t the case. I had paid for clearing, not burning or hauling away. So I had to negotiate a separate deal to get rid of the trees by burning them. More money. On top of this, I now needed to get a burn permit and all the equipment that the Forestry Service required, such as a fire truck with 500 gallons of water.

✔ Lesson Learned: If you’re going to clear land, talk to others first about everything that is involved. I didn’t and ended up spending more than I budgeted.

Dirt work: Once my land was mostly cleared, there was a noticeable problem that I didn’t anticipate. Namely, it wasn’t flat. It wasn’t uniformly sloped. There were small hills, bumps and valleys everywhere. Like the burning lesson learned, my contractor was clear with me that I didn’t pay for him to do any dirt work, like leveling or sloping the land. The current lumpy swath of land had standing pools of water after rains, so I needed to address this. Again, more cost and more time. But we did get it fixed.

✔ Lesson Learned: Like the “burning” lesson learned above, I should have learned more about all items to consider before doing this.

In retrospect I now know that I really should have had a better checklist of things to budget for, negotiate and plan for. If you’re in a position like me, talk to other growers about what they did. Try to create a “top 5” list of things to look out for.

It wasn’t all bad though, when my land was being cleared, I found out that I have a decent sand and gravel pit. I also had a swamp where I could pull some healthy soil from and add that to my land that I will be using for farming. I learned a lot though, and though painful and confusing at times, this part is done and now I can move on to planting next season.
I have an observation for everyone and it is in regards to my field of “Festiva Maxima.” I have 1000 roots of this variety planted, and the first year I dis-budded most of them, left a few and they bloomed a bit unusually. I wrote it off as a first year plant (as I was told many first years don't bloom with the typical form) and decided to let a few extra bloom as second year plants. Summer 2016 I let at least three bloom per root and still...more of the same. About 95% of the field bloomed with peonies that were distinctly different from the Festiva Maxima that I was used to. I took photos, detailed notes, asked growers, root suppliers, experts and was given a possible answer...they are not Festiva Maxima but a very similar variety named “Boule de Neige” - a French name for Snow Ball.

Similarities and Differences between the two cultivars:

Both are predominately white with red flecks and bloom at almost exactly the same time. I found that the Festiva Maxima (FM) bloomed only 5-7 days after the Boule de Neige (BdN). Both have very heavy dark green foliage and thick stems. Once I cut off all the blooms after harvest season I noticed a very distinct difference between the shape of the foliage. FM have stems that tend to flop over if unsupported, BdN don't need stakes or supports because they are so strong and straight. FM foliage is flat, BdN foliage is almost cupped, curved upwards. FM is bone white, BdN is creamy white. FM smells so incredibly amazing, BdN smells a bit strange, still pleasant, but not heavenly or exquisite. BdN has such a high number of side buds I want to rip out every last root! It is sometimes upwards of a dozen side buds per stem. FM have just a couple. FM has no yellow stamens, BdN has a very prominent ring of yellow stamens. The bud shape is completely different, BdN has a smashed ping pong ball appearance whereas the FM has a perfectly spherical ping pong ball shape. The sepals on the BdN are also a bit more red streaked than the FM. Denise Bowlan was kind enough to point out the bud shape difference and photograph them.

I have confirmed with growers in each region (except the South East) that they have this mix up in their fields, and the earliest planting I found with the BdN was a 2013 planting. One expert has confirmed this as a BdN in my field, I am planning on getting more expert opinions at the winter conference to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that we as growers may have a different variety in our fields than we thought. The reason I am doing this is for our customers. If they are used to a Festiva Maxima, and I ship what I thought was a “Festiva Maxima” that is actually a Boule de Neige and they see something they have never seen before it is going to throw them off guard, and potentially not trust Alaskan growers as reputable. We must sell true to name, and if we are accidentally mixed up then now we must spread the word and educate each other. Selling by color is one thing, but selling by a variety name must be 100% accurate. I urge you to check your fields this summer and keep tuned to future APGA newsletters. I plan on submitting additional articles as I learn more. Please feel free to contact me and send photos if you are curious, or even tell me I am wrong, or suggest an alternative answer to the difference. I am not an expert, just a grower who wants to be sure Alaskan Peonies are true to name and accurately represented 100% of the time.
A Message from the Editor

A big thank you to everyone who contributed to this newsletter!

This newsletter is created based on the contributions of APGA members and is a valuable resource to all—no matter at what stage you are in your endeavors.

All contributions are welcome for future editions. If you have an idea for an article, but don’t have the time to put it down on paper—get in touch, I can help.

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