



# Alaska Peony Growers Association Newsletter

Fall 2014

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## Calendar

Do you have things for a calendar?? Like Farm Bureau meetings, APGA meetings, workshops, etc. Send them to [jan.hanscom@gmail.com](mailto:jan.hanscom@gmail.com)

Oct 11, 9 - noon New Growers School, Fairbanks  
 Oct 11, 1 - 4pm Intermediate Growers School, Fairbanks  
 contact Marjie Illingworth for both schools

Jan 29-31 2015 Winter Conference, Fairbanks, AK

## Wrapping The Fields

by Mary Ver Hoef, Little Plum Garden and Peonies, Fairbanks

I am a new grower in Fairbanks, and want to share with you something I tried this summer as a mechanical approach to weed control. Like most other growers, weed control is a major task in my field. My peonies are adjacent to my food garden, so I only hand weed, and this has been a challenge to keep up with.



*Peony bed before wrapping.*



*Last mowing before wrapping the beds.*

In the spring of 2012 I created my first peony bed by cutting into my east lawn, and by Memorial Day 2013, I had created eleven more 25 foot long beds marching down the slope. Initially the lawn had healthy grass and a few dandelions. As I mowed around and between the beds all summer, I noticed how vigorous the grass and dandelions between the rows were growing, and realized this was going to become a problem: both as nutrient competition for my peonies and as a weed source. There was also starting to be some grass creep into the beds. Something had to be done.

It was a huge, laborious task cutting and removing all the sod by hand when I created the beds, and I could not face doing all that work again in order to remove the sod between the now established peony beds. Bringing in mechanical equipment was not a good option either because I didn't want to hurt the new plants, some of which had sprouted very near the bed edges. After talk-

ing with friends who are master gardeners, and visiting the Georgeson Botanical Garden and other farms, I decided to use some heavy ground cloth to smother the grass (and weeds) around and between the beds: I would wrap my fields with a heavy, woven polypropylene ground cloth. I chose to put the cloth only between the beds and leave the soil in the beds themselves open to allow plenty of space for the emerging stems as the plants grow to full size over the next few years. I will have more weeding with this approach, but hope it allows for full growth of the young peonies.

I was able to purchase a roll 500 feet long and 15 feet wide of high quality woven polypropylene ground cloth through a local green house. Two of my very handy friends were commissioned to make 500 long wire metal stakes to secure the cloth, and I hired a young, strong friend to help me with this project in early June.

The first step was to shovel cut along all the beds to create a straight edge, sever the encroaching grass and weed roots, and fully weed the beds. As my helper did a final mow around the prepared beds, I rolled out and cut swaths of the ground cloth, 30 feet long and five feet wide. Together we then installed the cloth between each row and around the field perimeter, folding under the cloth edges several inches and securing the cloth every yard or so with the long stakes. The whole job took us about ten hours to finish and it cost approximately \$900.

I was able to complete a similar wrap on my new 2014 field in early September. This field was completely tilled before planting, so I did not have the grass strip issue, but wanted to use the ground cloth to limit the overall weeding needed, and keep the field clean. I added a small connector section of ground cloth between the fields so my irrigation lines run on top for easy maintenance.

I have been very happy with this ground cloth all summer. It's kept my fields nice and clean, helped define my area to weed and essentially stopped the grass and weed creep into the fields. I have done a lot of hand weeding because of dandelion seed that blew in early in the season, but I have



*Little Plum Peony Farm with newly wrapped peony beds.*

saved dozens of hours of mowing. The black color of the cloth seemed to improve the micro climate heat in the field this summer and add passive solar heat to the irrigation feeder lines that lie on top of the cloth.

I am curious to see how the wrapped fields will overwinter. Will the frost heave out some of the stakes? Will ice lenses form under the ground cloth? Will the black cloth help warm up the soil and melt off the snow? It would be interesting to have thermometers in both the open soil and under the cloth to find out specific answers to these questions – but I think major temperature differences will be obvious come spring. This mechanical approach to weed control seems to be a very good answer in my fields, and I hope this approach may be helpful in yours.



*Top: cutting ground cloth. Middle: tools you need to wrap your field. Bottom: the finished product!*

## Wildberry Meadows, A Happy Family Farm by Sierra Hunsaker

Well, we certainly are happy, but we aren't quite yet a farm. We are the Hunsakers, and have been busy the past few years doing our research, dreaming big, and hunting for the perfect place to put down roots. Last spring, Grandma Kay sold her home and moved up to Alaska to join us and our four young children on a wild adventure. This is it! We are officially on our way to our very own farm!

This summer was largely spent hunting for good land to plant our dream, and in August, we finally found our place in Meadow Lakes. The dream of running a family farm has been developing for 15 years, and Alaska Peonies are the perfect opportunity to bring it into reality. It's going to take a lot of work to make it successful, but we are determined and on target for getting roots in the ground by next fall.

The goal is to transform our patch of wild Alaska spruce into a beautiful home for our young family, Grandma Kay, and 3000 happy, healthy peonies by this time next year. So far we have cleared access, the home site and field, and taken our very first soil sample. Our next steps will be securing a good water source, power to pump it, and making as many of the recommended fall amendments to our soil as we can before snowfall.

We are thrilled with this great opportunity, and have really enjoyed gathering insight, information and advice from all the great resources through Alaska Peony Growers Association and Alaska Peony Distributors. It has been humbling and inspiring to see so many new friends and old rally around to help us through the process of carving our dream out of the forest and finding success as new farmers.

We truly look forward to becoming more a part of this great community and hope to be able to offer that same encouragement and support to others. Feel free to follow us on Facebook for updates and progress on our new adventure.

## What I Learned this Summer by Pat Holloway

This season was a wild and crazy one for me and the UAF peony gardens. I had a great cutting year, and I saw some of the biggest and best cut flowers ever. Considering growers in the lower 48 often are removing peonies after 10 years because of declines in yield, my 13-year-old plants were fabulous. I was truly fortunate to spend time with Dr. Gary Chastagner and grad student Andrea Garfinkel on their trek across Alaska to find *Botrytis gray mold*. We only were able to visit about half of the growers, but it was a rewarding trek. Thanks to all the growers who allowed us to tromp through their fields and helped us with accommodations around the state. Here are a few tidbits I learned this summer.

If pollen from flowers lands on the leaves, it can be a great food source for germinating *Botrytis* spores. It can be the source of leaf damage later in the year. After learning that, I looked for *Botrytis* on my plants at UAF and noticed a lot of leaf infections were directly associated with dried up brown petals that had lodged at the base of leaves. Dr. C said petals are also great food for gray mold spores. What this taught me is deadhead, deadhead and deadhead to prevent spread of disease.

Dr. C also taught me that *Botrytis* spores often use wounds as entry points, but on the thousands of stems I saw across the state, the cut surfaces from removing bud blast, spent flowers and cut stems are not a major entry for *Botrytis*. Very rarely did we see rot traveling down the stem from a cut surface.

About two weeks before peony buds open, they gush nectar from organs called extra-floral nectaries. Instead of nectar being produced on the inside of flowers to attract pollinators, these organs on peonies are on the outside at the base of the bud. The sugar that coats the bud attracts all kinds of insects and also may be the prime food for *Botrytis* spores and black mold. I heard from growers in the Homer area that a lot of their cut buds are covered with black mold that needs to be washed off before transport. One grower thinks he solved that problem by having honey bee hives next to his field. The bees love the nectar. Other growers told me that where they see *Botrytis* starting on cut stems is at the bottom of the bud. The *Botrytis* might be using the nectar as a food source, and the nectaries are entries for infection into the bud.

One grower recommends locating buckets at the end of rows so as you go through the fields, you can remove off types, blasted buds, diseased stems and more. That way you don't end up dropping them or having to lug a bucket around in the field.

I like the two growers who got fed up with written signs to show which cultivar was in what row. They faded

or were picked off by ravens. They painted rocks to show the color of the flower and had a code on them that was easily recognizable. A white rock with a D painted on it is, of course, Duchess de Nemours.

One grower opened her gardens for a few hours at the end of the season and sold blooms as a U-pick for \$1 per stem. Cuts were limited to 12 inch stems, and all stems not to be used were pre-cut before the sale.

Don't use alsike or white clover as a ground cover if using landscape fabric in the rows. These clovers are highly aggressive and will grow right over the top of the fabric and root right through it.

Lots of people are planning to plant red fescue ('Arctared') between rows and have been told (by whom, I don't know) that it does not spread or spreads so slowly that it will not become a problem. Red fescue is a sod forming grass and will spread. It is used most commonly as a lawn grass along with bluegrass. Don't expect it to stay in one place. Dave Ianson has a trial in Mat-Su that looks at some alternatives for between row-covers. Hopefully he will share his results at a conference in the near future.

One grower experienced a huge infestation of wireworms (click beetle larvae) that ate right through the roots. I emailed peony people all over the world, and not one of them had ever heard of wireworms in peonies even though they had seen them especially on potatoes. I suspect the wireworm damage came from a residual population of insects that had been present in an old waste field that had contained a lot of native grasses. The field had been tilled and ten days later, planted with peony roots. The wireworms, after losing their wild grass food, turned to peony roots instead. Lesson: don't plant immediately after tilling old fields or hay fields.

Lots of people experienced Lygus bug damage this year. Many people blamed lots of bud blast on these bugs, but my search and examination of the blasted buds showed me that the bud blast was probably caused by something else, and the bugs came in to feed on the rotted remains. I did see more Lygus bugs this year than any other year at UAF. They did do damage to large flower buds by leaving puncture marks on the petals. They do not chew. They suck, so the damage looked like mosquito bites.

More later as I remember things. Feel free to jog my memory!

## Recent Efforts towards Alaska Peony Recognition

by Rita Jo Shoultz (APGA Promotion Chairperson)



*Rita Jo Shoultz with Krysta Wagner, Deputy Director of the USDA*

I'm sure everyone has opened their e-mail one morning and been told you've won the lottery, or someone has died and left you a million dollars and all you have to do is send the filing fees etc. etc. Yah right!! That was my first response when I opened my e-mail and it said 'You are invited to the White House.' Yah right!! But it was for real.

As far as I've been able to figure, Ko Klaver consulted with ASCFG and the California folks and they decided I'd be a good person to nominate for Champions of Change For the Future of Agriculture. I had to look it up too.

After reviewing the program I knew the awards would go to food people. After all, food is very important. But for a cut flower person to be accepted and invited to the White House I believe was a first. And yes, the awards did go to the cattlemen, the 100,000 acre wheat growers, the hog growers etc. But still, to be recognized by the White House as a cut flower grower was a tremendous coup.

All the fun stuff of security, being in the White House, the excitement of being in our country's capital, that all happened. It was wonderful, breathtaking, and such an honor. But that was only the beginning.

I took with me over 400 peony stems including a few from Beth Van Sandt's Scenic Place Peonies and Mike and Michelle's Chilly Root to round up the varieties. Try checking two huge boxes of peony strapped together through security! When I arrived at the DC airport, Ko picked me up and I told him to take me to Home Depot

for buckets and a Seven 11 for ice. The next four days I kept those peony stems happy in my hotel bathtub. I had to have a short meeting with my almost non English speaking house keeper to make sure she understood what was happening in my bathroom. Yes, I left a big tip and a bouquet for her.



*There are all those peonies in the bath tub!*

After the White House affair, I had planned on meeting Lilia McFarland, New and Beginning Farmer and Rancher Program Coordinator from the USDA office who had been so helpful in helping me with all my arrangements. I arrived with two bouquets and waited after security clearance for my escort. Lilia said she had a surprise for me. I was escorted to Krysta Harden's office. Krysta is the Deputy Director of the United States Department of Agriculture!! She loved the peonies. I was overwhelmed with the opportunity to talk about Alaska peony with her. She asked how she could help.

I floated back to my hotel for a change of clothes to go to dinner with Ko and Bill Frymoyer. Bill is the DC connection for the California Cut Flower Growers, the American Grown Program and also represents some of Alaska's shrimp people. He's been working in DC for over 25 years and definitely knows the ropes. Right away he started telling me all the appointments he had scheduled for me the next day. I had made arrangements to meet with Senator Murkowski as she has been a terrific Alaska Peony supporter. But that was pretty much it. Then I planned to catch a plane and come home.

The next morning I started my

schedule of Bill's planned meetings with several of the California Delegates to talk about American Grown and the movement to have American Grown flowers in the White House. It was very productive. Of course I had bouquets for every office. And I've received thank you notes from all these offices along with requests to have peony in their offices all season. Believe it or not, I found a wholesaler there who will make bouquets and take them around for us if we send stems next season. Everyone we visited asked 'how can we help?'

As Alaskans you will appreciate this story. Walking down the streets of DC with a large open box of bouquets gets a lot of attention. Folks kept stopping me and asking if I was selling the bouquets. When I told them they were from my farm in Alaska—you know the rest of that story—cold, dark, freezing—all the above. It was quite hilarious.

That afternoon I had the wonderful experience of visiting with our Senator Murkowski. I was totally honored to be asked to film the Alaska Report with her. Another experience of getting into places I've never been. The film was 25 minutes and has been aired several times on our Alaska TV stations. You can view the Alaska Report at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JxtPUwJGhqw>. She asked—How can I help?

Later that same day I visited Senator Mark Begich's and Congressman Don Young's offices and they all loved the Alaska peony bouquets. They asked how they could help.

Sometime during all this meeting and greeting everyone I was told I needed to meet with the White House florist. But I received an e-mail that said she did not want a formal introduction as I might be a vendor to the White House. That was OK with me. I'll settle for a vendor. Wouldn't that be a kick to have our Alaska Peony in the White House?



*Rita Jo talks with Senator Murkowski on the Alaska Report TV show.*



Rita Jo with Congressman Don Young.

Here are some of the results from all these meetings, filming etc.

- I appeared on Fox 45 Baltimore talking about Alaska peony (with bouquets as props) where I learned all about 'scripting' and 'staging'. I started using the rail system for these adventures after the first day of spending over \$100 for cabs.
- As a direct result with meeting Matthew Felling, Senator Murkowski's Communications Director, I was recommended to do some TV spots here in Alaska. I appeared on Channel 11's Daybreak program last month. I must have done OK because I've been invited back. If you get the National Perishable News feed, you saw it repeated there. You can view this interview at <http://www.ktva.com/pioneering-peonies-in-the-last-frontier-890/>. And of course, there were bouquets.
- Several of the folks I visited in DC have written letters to President Obama requesting only American Grown flowers be used in the White House and of course our delegates suggested quite strongly that some of those flowers be Alaska Peony. So now even the President of the United States of America knows about Alaska peonies. It doesn't get much better than that.

I hope to give a complete report at the annual Conference in Fairbanks this winter and by then have some follow up results from my visit.

Looking at the international market I hosted a WU-SATA day seminar in Homer last month. Francine Have-meister, our Alaska Division of Agriculture Director, and Amy Pettit, the person we all know as the 'grant expert' were both not only in attendance but provided financial support for the function. It was a whirlwind day with so much new information about International Marketing, one more avenue for Promoting Alaska peony.

## Last Frontier Peonies-A Small Farm with Big Dreams

by Randy and Karin Stringer

For years we have pondered what to do with our yard which had burned in the Millers Reach Fire in 96. Last fall I approached my husband with the idea of growing peonies. Surprisingly he didn't say no but started researching peonies and decided we would give it a try. We attended planting and picking workshops and ordered our first roots to plant this fall.

Taking advantage of the natural slope of the land we planted directly in the ground. However, our soil though has been a challenge. It is a mixture of sand, peat, clay, and lots and lots of rocks. We have picked rocks and picked rocks and still more appear.

We dug the first holes and then got several days of hard rain. Our holes turned to cement. Yuck. We learned not to dig when rain is in the forecast.

So far we have 250 roots in the ground and another 200 coming. Next spring we plan to plant 500 roots and put in a drip system. Our goal is to have 1000 roots in the ground and stay within our budget of \$5000.00. So far we are on track and hoping for bigger returns one day.

## Looking for Support?

by Martha Lojewski

I was recently talking with an experienced peony farmer who said we are all floating down the same river, just in different boats. We are all working towards the same final product, the best possible peonies to represent our Alaska Grown label on a global market. So why not put our heads together and collaborate? If you'd like to get a second opinion on a pest control issue, tips on root varieties, help sourcing a contractor, a referral for an accountant, or just some interesting ideas about peonies in Alaska then try coming to a meeting of the Alaska Peony Cooperative. We are located in the Matanuska Susitna region representing farms from Eagle River to Trapper Creek. We regularly do a phone conference with two other regions in the state and do a lot of collaboration with industry professionals to help each of us along our journey. We are in the infancy stage of forming our growers cooperative and would love to have you come to our meetings, or just be added to the e-mail list to receive updates and news. We meet every other week in Wasilla. If you'd like more information please contact me at [marthalojewski@gmail.com](mailto:marthalojewski@gmail.com) or at 306-8137. Come learn with us!

## A New Peony Farm in Palmer, AK by Jim Zink

We are starting with a 3 acre area by the Butte. Currently I am clearing the land with the mini excavator and my goal is to start next fall planting with one half acre. If all goes well I will follow on the next three years with adding invitational half acre per year. I would like to begin to cut and sell flowers in five years with each follow on year bringing on additional half acre of mature plants. It already feels like a lot of work Just in clearing the land, But I look forward to working with beautiful flowers into my retirement years. I believe the soil in the area is excellent for growing all sorts of plants. To tell you the truth I have no experience which is one of the reasons why I'm starting out with a small half acre plot. I am looking forward to being a member of the APGA I hope that members will share their knowledge with me to help me be successful. I have included some photos of my land preparation.



*Above: The beginning of a new farm. To right: Removing trees!*



*It is hard work clearing a new peony field.*

## Lessons Learned Our First Year Growing Peonies

by Jill Russell, Boreal Peonies



*Dave Russell next to the new sign.*

Boreal Peonies is a 40 acre peony farm located 20 miles east of Fairbanks in Two Rivers, Alaska. Prior to purchasing the farm, the property had been farmed for hay for about 10-20 years. We purchased the land in May of 2012 and the process of turning the old hay fields into peony fields began. Throughout that first summer, the hay/grass was mowed, killed, and many, many small trees were removed from the area that would be planted with peonies in 2013. Initially, we rented a chipper to mulch the small trees after we cut them down. It didn't take long to realize that there were just too many trees to chip. So, we scrapped the chipper idea and loaded the trees into the back of the truck and took them to a burn pile.

Once the trees were removed, the long process of killing the weeds and breaking up the ground began. Initially, we used a large root cutting plow, just to get through all of the tree roots and break through the hard packed soil. It was a slow, arduous process. We found another, smaller plow overgrown by trees and shrubs back in the woods. So, we dug it up, rigged it up to the tractor and went over the fields again with this smaller plow. By the end of the summer 2012, about 7 acres had been plowed and prepared for spring planting.



*Tractor and plow dug out of the woods.*



*Inspecting the soil and reviewing farm preparation practices.*

At the same time that the fields were being plowed, electricity was being put in at the farm, and a well was dug for irrigating the peonies. We were fortunate to have electricity bordering our land, so our expense was just for two poles to bring power to a central location on the farm, and for a meter pole. The well was drilled to a depth of about 65 feet and capped. Since we weren't planting anything that summer, we waited and installed the pump the following spring. Multiple soil samples were taken by the Fairbanks Soil and Water Conservation District and the soil analysis helped us determine which nutritional supplements to put into the soil when we planted the peonies the next spring. Representatives from the Alaska Peony Growers Association (APGA) visited the farm and reviewed our practices and examined the soil in mid-August 2012. We were pleased to receive positive comments on their evaluation and were ready to move forward and order peony roots for 2013.

Over the winter of 2012/13, snow covered our plowed fields and nothing else was done to the fields until spring. On Valentine's Day 2013, we were really pleased to see about 3 feet of snow still covering the fields. Unfortunately, spring came late in 2013. "Breakup" occurred

around May 24th, and the snow melted. But our plowed fields were covered in standing water which still had clumps of ice frozen to the ground. Dave counted several species of ducks using our flooded fields as migratory stop-over points those first few weeks. The fields were so wet, that the drilling company sunk their truck while installing the well pump. We couldn't get the tractor into the field to put in our flower beds for 3 weeks. Lesson 1: the weather in the Interior is different every year. We hired a contractor and dug swales around the perimeter of the fields to drain water away from the plants. We won't get flooded again.

Meanwhile, 5000 peony roots were still in their shipping crates and sitting in the barn. By the time we could plant our first peony root, the plants had sprouted and our Coral Charms were over 10 inches tall! I felt like Lisa & Oliver Douglas in the old TV series, Green Acres! We realized that we needed to get the roots out of the shipping crates quickly because the superficial, top plants were



*Plants were sprouting in the crates as we tried to get them planted so they were held in a nursery planting and transplanted into the field.*



*Installing the irrigation system became a priority when drought hit the field.*



sprouting and the deeper plants in the crates were molding and rotting. Lesson 2: Don't purchase more peonies than you can plant in a timely manner. We transferred all 5000 peony roots to a temporary nursery bed. Little did we know that we'd have peonies in our temporary nursery until July 20th! Why? Because, then the drought hit.



*And... there were multiple fires that shut down the road as well as power to the farm.*

As many of you know, the Interior of Alaska had record high temperatures in June and July of 2013. No rain, just heat. Lesson 3: Plan to irrigate. By mid-June, we had to stop planting and focus our attention on watering the plants in the nursery and in the field. We couldn't afford to lose our investment, so we installed an irrigation system. We had now gotten into a daily groove of watering in the morning, planting until we couldn't stand the mosquitoes anymore and then watering overnight. If we planted straight through the 4th of July weekend we would be done planting peonies by July 10th at the latest! Unfortunately,

we did not anticipate the fires. That's right, fires – plural.

On June 18th, a forest fire ran across Chena Hot Springs Road near the Two Rivers Lodge and shut down the farm for a day. Electrical power was turned off and no traffic could travel the road for hours. Three weeks later, we were evacuated from the farm due to threat from a second fire coming north from Salcha and threatening to cross the Chena River (just 1 mile south of the farm). That stopped us from planting and watering. No power, no access for the day. But, hey, the good news is that no one lost a home during either fire, and the Lodge still has the best steaks around! Lesson 4: Expect the unexpected. We need to get a generator.

After a long, hot, event-filled summer, we planted our last peony on July 20th, just days before the APGA Farm Tour. 5000 peonies in the ground. Up went the new farm sign, and we were ready to show her off! Lessons learned: 1) Expect the unexpected; 2) Plan to irrigate; 3) Don't buy more roots than you can plant in a timely manner; and 4) The weather will always be different than you expect. Year one was under our belt and we looked forward to seeing how many of our peonies would survive the drought of 2013 and come up the following spring!



*Boreal Peony Farm*

## Meeting with Senator Murkowski at the Georgeson Botanical Garden

by Kim Herning

A rare sunny day at the end of June found Senator Lisa Murkowski at the Georgeson Botanical Garden with Dr.'s Pat Holloway, Steven Sparrow and a large group of area peony farmers. According to Ron Illingworth, he had invited Senator Murkowski to Fairbanks to talk about the developing peony industry. The meeting had been in the planning stage for several years and finally everything had lined up to make it happen, even the weather.

Using the perfect backdrop of hundreds of peonies in full bloom and closed buds, the group told Senator Murkowski how farming peonies as cut flowers started in the place they were all standing. Different members of the group took turns telling the Senator about the growth in the number of farms, the number of roots going into the ground and the anticipated stem harvest in the years to come. They told the Senator they were shipping cut peonies to florists, brides and event planners all across the United States, Canada and China and had inquiries from Europe and Ecuador. The farmers explained they were not even close to meeting the demand for Alaska peonies. The discussion shifted to what the Alaska Peony Industry needed for support to be able to thrive and grow. One of the challenges is lack of research as much is unknown

about peony farming in Alaska with all of its different climate regions. The Lygus bug infestation in the Interior made the group acutely aware of the lack of a local government agency that could take the lead in finding a cause and possible treatments.

The group told Senator Murkowski current marketing is done on a small scale by individuals and pack houses. A marketing specialist and statewide campaigns were needed to give Alaska peonies the same exposure as Alaska Seafood. Marketing also included using Alaska peonies in State Department events and other similar things, as well as just keeping peonies on folks minds as they deal with trade. And when talking about trade and Alaska peonies as an export crop they group said they would need assistance at all levels in the state to include phyto certification.

The meeting was scheduled for forty five minutes, but ended up going for an hour and a half. All in all everyone who attended felt it was a very productive meeting and Senator Murkowski left the Georgeson Botanical garden with a bouquet of pink peonies and a smile on her face.

To learn about Kim's farm visit [http://www.newsminer.com/features/sundays/alaska\\_grown/peony-venture-blooms-at-herning-family-s-former-homestead/article\\_59ab2bb4-15b1-11e4-b71b-0017a43b2370.html](http://www.newsminer.com/features/sundays/alaska_grown/peony-venture-blooms-at-herning-family-s-former-homestead/article_59ab2bb4-15b1-11e4-b71b-0017a43b2370.html)



## A Peony Plan Grows with the Help of Fairbanks Flower Buffs

by Nancy Tarnai / Alaska Grown | Posted 3 months ago in the Fairbanks Newsminer  
edited by Jan Hanscom and updated for this newsletter

Two years ago, University of Alaska Fairbanks Professor Pat Holloway was attending the Luoyang, Henan Province, China, peony festival when a lightbulb exploded in her mind. “There were 10 million peony blooms in Luoyang,” Holloway said. “They were in every park and public area; there were acres of peonies.” Holloway, who has conducted extensive research on peony growing in Alaska and has worked for more than a decade to boost the peony industry, said she felt puny next to this monumental event, but it was there that she first thought that Fairbanks could do something similar, if on a smaller scale.

“For several years I’ve tried to introduce the idea of value added products,” Holloway said. “You can add to the value of \$4 stems of flowers with T-shirts, mugs, books, calendars and festivals.” She has been urging members of the Alaska Peony Growers Association to get their communities to show support, and it’s working. The Matanuska-Susitna Borough has declared itself the peony capital of Alaska, the Fairbanks North-Star Borough Economic Development Commission has recommended to the borough assembly that they make the peony the borough flower and growers in Homer have gone wild planting peonies in public places.

Holloway, who is a horticulture professor in the UAF School of Natural Resources and Extension, had been contemplating how to get peonies planted around the FNSB Borough and decided it was time to connect the Georgeson Botanical Garden, Arctic Alaska Peonies (a cooperative of peony growers and pack houses) and 4-H members. The result was a wonderful peony root sale fundraiser for youths, as well as a way to get more peonies in the ground. The botanical garden provided the cooler space and an instructional sheet for planting and caring for peonies. The peonies to get this project started were donated by Oregon Perennials. Many people ordered roots for spring 2015 delivery but many also wanted them “right now” so the 500 donated by Oregon Perennials gave the 4-H youths a way to start.

Holloway dreams of the day the borough is carpeted with peonies. “I hope someone, not me, organizes a peony festival to show support for the industry and add value locally,” she said.

Jan Hanscom, a local peony grower and 4-H leader, has helped coordinate the effort. She said only two 4-H families have gotten involved, but they sold over 500 peony roots, with about 350 of the roots purchased being donated for public spaces. People who want to help but

don’t want to grow the flowers themselves can buy roots for places like the Tanana Valley Fairgrounds, the Pioneer Home, or the borough library. Festival Fairbanks will take care of planting the roots in other downtown spaces. A Japanese-type flower was offered this past spring, and the 4-Hers are taking orders for next year. Buyers can pay 4-Hers to plant the roots; the youths use the funds for 4-H related travel or leadership projects.

Caleb Seekins, 11, has been selling and planting peony roots for several weeks. He plans to use his proceeds for a trip to a Youth in Governance citizenship program in Juneau. A recent sunny day found him planting a root for Jennifer Delzer off of Auburn Drive. “Peonies are my favorite flower,” Delzer said. As Caleb’s mother, Tami Seekins, is her friend, Delzer decided to support the project. “A friend and a favorite flower,” she said. “How can it get better than that?” Delzer is slowly moving her flower beds to all perennials. “I like pretty things, but not all the work,” she said. “The annuals are taxing me. My goal is to plant one peony a year till the bed is full.”

Seekins is happy her children learned a new skill and that more people are planting peonies. “We hope to make Fairbanks a more beautiful place,” she said.

If there are other areas of the state interested in how we formed this partnership between 4-H, Arctic Alaska Peony Coop and the Georgeson Botanical Garden I am happy to share. I turned out to be a successful fund raiser and a worthwhile partnership.

*This column was provided as a service by the UAF School of Natural Resources and Extension and the Agricultural and Forestry Experiment Station. Nancy Tarnai is the school and station’s public information officer. She can be reached at [ntarnai@alaska.edu](mailto:ntarnai@alaska.edu)*

If another region would like to form a partnership with a youth group to do a similar project, send a message to Jan at [jan.hanscom@gmail.com](mailto:jan.hanscom@gmail.com) for more information.

# The Alaska Peony Market Cooperative, Winter update for 2014

by Richard Repper

Alaska Peony Market (APM) Co-op consists of peony farms around the central Kenai Peninsula. The co-op structure allows multiple farms to work together and maximize profits for individual farmer members. 2014 was a busy season. Guests from around the state toured APM member farms during the APGA summer farm tour.

We have seen crop loss in the past when buds all blew open in one day and couldn't be harvested fast enough. Misfortune was averted at Echo Lake Farm on two occasions this summer. An early morning S.O.S. went out at 6:30 am to APM Co-op members. Respondents were calling in at 7:00 am. Our skilled co-op members grabbed buckets and cutters. In two hours, the APM team cut thousands of stems and stocked the coolers. Echo Lake would like to thank co-op members



*Alaska Peony Market Co-operative members.*

for their teamwork and generosity.

APM sent stems to Miami for display at a large Floral Expo. The hit of the show! Lisa Murkowski sent a wonderful letter of thanks for the beautiful APM peonies given to her at the Kenai River Classic. "It gave me great pride to brag about the amazing peonies coming out of Alaska. Simply stunning". APM shipped trial runs to high volume markets in the lower 48. An APM booth was set up at farmers market and Soldotna Progress Days. Thank you Lark for representing APM. Members pooled funds to send our traveling ambassador, Wayne Floyd, to the Fairbanks summer farm tour so he could report back to APM with all the latest information.

In 2014 our co-op saw an increase of buyers requesting large volume orders. In the near future, as our farms mature, large orders will be filled by pooling inventory from multiple co-op farms.

Alaska Peony Market had several entries at Kenai Peninsula Fair and the Alaska State Fair. A big thank you to Patti Floyd for her talent in designing gorgeous peony arrangements. At the Kenai Fair the Grand Champion in the Flower Division was awarded to Alaska Peony Market Co-op. Two individual peony stems also won: first place for Avalanche and second place for a Blush. At the September Alaska State Fair, APM was awarded a first place blue ribbon for a single Duchess de Nemours and



*APM picking crew at Echo Lake Farm.*



*APM fair entries did very well this season.*

Patti's peony arrangement received a very respectable third place against stiff competition.

As fall approaches inquiries continue to roll in from Peninsula growers interested in joining APM Co-op. You can call 1-800-492-1988 or check us out on-line at [www.alaskapeonymarket.com](http://www.alaskapeonymarket.com).



*Senator Lisa Murkowski was given peonies at the Kenai River Classic.*

## North Pole Peonies by Marjie Illingworth

Greeting from North Pole Peonies! First off, many thanks to all of you who sent greetings, support and prayers over the last few months. Losing our home has been difficult, but we are rebuilding. Hopefully we will be moving in before the holidays. Building is such a challenge and always takes longer than expected.

As for the peonies, it has been quite the summer! After last years heat, this cooler, rainy summer has offered its own set of challenges. Planting went well into late May, and the plants came up very well. It looked like a bumper crop and then the Lygus bugs hit. We took a bit of a loss, but still had plenty to harvest.

But now it is fall and it was time for, as Ron calls it, The Plague of Locusts to cut down the stems. This year there was a high school athletic team and high school choir that shared the project. With the peonies down, the irrigation lines blown, we will have more time to concentrate on other tasks.

Look forward to seeing many of you at the 2015 APGA Conference in Fairbanks!

## APGA Winter Conference Registration

Interior Peony Growers and their Arctic Alaska Peonies Cooperative are proud to host the Alaska Peony Growers Association 2015 Annual Conference to be held January 30 & 31st with pre and post conference schools. The conference will be hosted in the Westmark Hotel and Conference Center in downtown Fairbanks. In addition to a great conference, winter attractions in Fairbanks include the northern lights, ice carving, dog mushing, the Museum of the North, and other special attractions.

We anticipate over 200 peony growers from Alaska, other states, and even Canada to participate in the Conference. Thursday, during the day, will be dedicated to pre-conferences workshops. That evening will kick off the conference with the opening of the Trade Show and a nationally noted speaker. Friday and Saturday will feature various plenary sessions, break-out sessions, and round the table small group discussions. Friday night will be an awards banquet, and Sunday we will host a special school on soil testing and using soil testing results to foster peony growth.

Some of the topics of interest to conference attendees are:

- Effective marketing
- Shipping & exporting – maintaining the cold chain
- Managing the risk of peony farming
- Farm taxes
- What brokers expect
- Cooperative conversations

- Developing a peony farm workforce
- Evaluating risks in peony farming
- Taxes and peony farming
- Resources for starting a new business
- Weed control – when and how
- Botrytis control – when and how
- Insect control – when and how
- Effective plant nutrition
- Irrigation – planning your system
- Harvesting
- Chilling effectively

We are gathering expert speakers to address these varied topics. You can check the conference web site [www.alaskapeonyconference.com](http://www.alaskapeonyconference.com) for up-dates on speakers, topics, and to register.

Registration for APGA Members opens October 1<sup>st</sup> at [www.alaskapeonyconference.com](http://www.alaskapeonyconference.com). General Conference Registration will be \$150 for APGA members who register during the early registration period October 1 – November 30th. Open Registration begins December 1st and at that time, the registration fee will be \$200.

Plan to attend the 2015 Alaska Peony Growers Association Conference. For more information, contact [marji@northpolepeonies.com](mailto:marji@northpolepeonies.com) or visit the conference web site [www.alaskapeonyconference.com](http://www.alaskapeonyconference.com).

## Membership Renewal Time!

APGA Memberships are on a calendar year basis (January to December). If you have not renewed your APGA membership by January 1st, your membership automatically becomes 'inactive' and your Farm Page disappears from the website. Membership Renewal time is a very busy time for me, so to ensure your Farm Page doesn't disappear, be sure to get your renewal in as early as possible to give me time to update the webpage.

Memberships can be renewed beginning in October. I live 30 miles away from the nearest Wells Fargo bank, so I typically hold onto checks for a while until I have a handful to deposit or I am heading 'into town'. The fastest and easiest way to renew is on line. However, if you renew on line, I still need an updated Membership Form emailed or snail mailed to me.

It would be a good idea to renew your membership before the APGA winter conference registration as membership renewal **will not** be an option on the registration form. Also, there is a discount for early registration and being an APGA member.

You can mail your membership form and check to:

Sue Lincoln  
APGA Membership Chair  
[cordiprah@gmail.com](mailto:cordiprah@gmail.com)  
PO Box 54  
Willow, AK 99688

## APGA ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP REGISTRATION

|                                |                     |            |            |
|--------------------------------|---------------------|------------|------------|
| MEMBERSHIP YEAR<br><b>2015</b> | FARM / ORGANIZATION |            |            |
| NAME                           |                     |            |            |
| STREET ADDRESS / PO BOX NO.    | CITY                | STATE      | ZIP        |
| EMAIL                          | HOME PHONE          | WORK PHONE | CELL PHONE |

- Check here if your contact information has changed since last year.
- Check here if you do NOT want your contact information posted on the "Member's Only" area of APGA's web site.

Check the type of membership you are paying for:       NEW       RENEW       UPGRADE

**Commercial Grower - \$200/yr.**  
 A Commercial Grower membership is for a farm in Alaska growing peonies for a commercial purpose. The farm must have a minimum of 500 peonies planted in Alaska and have an agricultural business license issued by the state of Alaska. Each farm may obtain only one Commercial Grower membership, but each farm may have an unlimited number of individuals accorded the benefits of commercial grower membership with the exception of voting privileges. Each farm is allowed a single vote for any open seat on the Board of Directors.

Alaska Business License No.: \_\_\_\_\_ (required)

Second email address (for newsletters & other notifications): \_\_\_\_\_

**Associate - \$50/yr.**  
 An Associate membership is for an individual who is a resident of Alaska and interested in the Alaska commercial peony industry. Associates do not have voting rights.

**Supporter - \$25/yr.**  
 A Supporter membership is for an individual who is not an Alaska resident. Supporters do not have voting rights.

**Organization - \$25/yr.**  
 Organization memberships are for private organizations, companies, or government agencies wishing to support the Alaska peony industry. Organizations do not have voting rights.

Make check out to: **ALASKA PEONY GROWERS ASSOCIATION, INC**

Mail to: APGA Membership  
 PO Box 54  
 Willow, AK 99688


For APGA use:

**Check No:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Amount:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Received on:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Received by:** \_\_\_\_\_

SECRETARY    TREASURER    ROSTER    RECEIPT    WEB



**ALASKA  
 PEONY  
 GROWERS  
 ASSOCIATION**

APGA 2015 WINTER CONFERENCE  
Registration for conference

|         |       |       |
|---------|-------|-------|
| Name    |       | Email |
| Last    | First | MI    |
| Address |       | Phone |
| Street  |       |       |
| City    | State | zip   |

Priority Conference Registration for APGA Members \* only (until Nov 30, 2014)

|                               | Unit cost | Total |
|-------------------------------|-----------|-------|
| Registration                  | \$150.00  |       |
| Friday only                   | \$ 80.00  |       |
| Saturday only                 | \$ 80.00  |       |
| Friday Evening Awards Banquet | \$30.00   |       |

includes all sessions for the days participating - continental breakfast, lunch and snacks

- TO JOIN APGA OR PAY YOUR 2015 DUES and be eligible for early registrations GO TO [www.alaskapeonies.com](http://www.alaskapeonies.com)
- Conference registration after Nov. 30, 2015 will be \$200.

Pre-Conference Schools Thursday, January 29<sup>th</sup> 2015 \*

| Time        | School                             | Cost / attendee | Number | Total |
|-------------|------------------------------------|-----------------|--------|-------|
| 9 am – noon | New Growers School                 | \$30.00         |        |       |
| 9 am – noon | Income Tax for Farms               | \$30.00         |        |       |
| 1:00 – 4:00 | Intermediate Growers School        | \$30.00         |        |       |
| 1:00 – 4:00 | Peony Growing - Right Investment?? | \$30.00         |        |       |

- lunch on your own

Post-Conference School, Sunday February 1, 2015

| Time        | School                              | Cost/attendee | Number | Total |
|-------------|-------------------------------------|---------------|--------|-------|
| 9 am – 3 pm | Managing Soils to Feed Your Peonies | 60.00         |        |       |

Registration form can be mailed to:  
North Pole Peonies  
5730 Eielson Farm Road  
North Pole, AK 99705





## 2015 APGA Calendar Contest

Last year's calendar contest was such a great success we are doing it again! All requirements remain the same as last year; however, in order to ensure no copy write infringements, you **MUST** fill out an entry form! Any entry received without a form will be disqualified.

### PRIZES!

**1ST PLACE:** Cover placement of your photo on the 2015 Calendar + choice of month for calendar placement + 5 free calendars

**2ND PLACE:** 2nd choice of photo placement in 2015 Calendar + 1 free calendar

Ten other photos will be selected for the remaining months. The farm for each selected entry will receive a free copy of the 2015 Calendar.

The farm owners of all the winning peony photos will have their photos included on the back cover of the calendar.

### CONTEST REQUIREMENTS

1. The photographed peonies must come from an APGA grower member farm.
2. The photograph can be taken by anyone (e.g., a florist who used your flowers or a professional photographer) but the name of the photographer must be provided along with the photographer's approval for unlimited use of the photograph (included on entry form).
3. There are no restrictions on the photographs' content except that peonies must be the main subject. Photographs may be composed of peonies in the field or any type of arrangement.
4. Each APGA grower member may enter up to five photographs.

### TO ENTER

1. Digital copies of high quality photographs (either jpg or pdf) along with the attached submittal form should be e-mailed to [apga2015calendar@gmail.com](mailto:apga2015calendar@gmail.com).
2. The release statement on the submittal form must be signed by the photographer.
3. Entries must be received by October 20.

**ENTRY FORM**  
**2<sup>nd</sup> ANNUAL APGA PHOTO CONTEST**

**PHOTOGRAPH'S TITLE** \_\_\_\_\_

**FARM NAME** (must be an APGA grower member) \_\_\_\_\_

**YOUR NAME** \_\_\_\_\_

**PHONE NUMBER** \_\_\_\_\_

**EMAIL ADDRESS** \_\_\_\_\_

**PEONY VARIETY (IES) SHOWN IN PHOTOGRAPH** \_\_\_\_\_

**PREFERRED MONTH FOR CALENDAR PLACEMENT** \_\_\_\_\_

**2<sup>nd</sup> CHOICE MONTH FOR CALENDAR PLACEMENT** \_\_\_\_\_

**DESIGNER'S NAME** (if applicable) \_\_\_\_\_

**PHOTOGRAPHER'S NAME** \_\_\_\_\_

**PHOTOGRAPHER'S SIGNATURE & DATE** \_\_\_\_\_

**PHOTOGRAPHER'S RELEASE**

CHECK ONE:

- APGA has unlimited use of this photograph.
- APGA's right to this photograph is limited to its inclusion in the 2015 Calendar.