



Alaska Peony Growers Association Newsletter

Spring/Summer 2014

Calendar

Jul 25-26	Interior Alaska Peony Farm Tours
Jan 29-31	2015 Winter Conference, Fairbanks, AK

Mt. McKinley Peonies has a walk behind tractor!
by Martha Lojewski

We are Nathan and Martha Lojewski with Mt. McKinley Peonies in Willow and we are happy to report that our two wheeled walk behind tractor has arrived and is performing wonderfully on our farm. We learned about this type of tractor this past winter and decided upon a Grillo 107D with a Berta flail mower and a Berta Single Rotary Plow. We purchased it all from Earth Tools in Kentucky. This is the link to their assortment of attachments and walk behind tractors available. <http://www.earthtoolsbcs.com/> The tractor has the ability to attach the implements on the front or the rear because the handle bar and gear shifters can swivel and the implements available range from basic farm tools to snow blowers and ride on carts. We also purchased a hitch and will be getting a dump cart made for a four wheeler, but adaptable to the tractor with the hitch. We decided on this type of tractor because it is compact, a little less expensive than a conventional four wheeled tractor and has a wider variety of implements without each tool needing its own engine. Mother Earth News also has a few articles on this type of tractor, <http://www.motherearthnews.com/homesteading-and-livestock/walk-behind-tractors-comparison.aspx#axzz347eJ5Nrp>

The flail mower requires a lot of power to run and although the engine runs it beautifully it is just strong enough to perform its duty. We mowed over one and a half inch diameter willows and aspens, rose bushes, mounds of moss, grass

that is several feet tall and reduced it all down to a finely shredded mulch. The larger branches are pushed out the side and not really chipped up, but it makes cleaning them out of the field easier this way anyway. The rose bushes seemed to give the mower the toughest time, but still got them out of the field. Rocks, branches and logs were not a problem for the mower, they all got tossed to the side. It is a tough piece of equipment and built to last.



The Grillo 107D walk behind tractor. Photo by Martha Lojewski

The rotary plow also out performed my expectations. Our field has some rocks, large mounds of moss and grass clumps, willow and aspen root balls, and quite a few decaying logs. Everything got pulled up, turned around and made cleaning up the debris very easy. Only a couple of times did the plow get plugged up with a log that was too big to toss to the side or a root ball that was simply too large to uproot.

Overall we are happy with our investment and impressed with it's durability, ease of use and wide availability of implements. Earth tools was and still is very helpful with all of our questions and recommended as a supplier for this type of tractor. Although this tractor is physically demanding and only made for smaller farms, 5 acres or less was the recommendation I read, we are happy with our purchase.

Happy Farming!

Ban Your Bane: Notorious Weeds of the Field

By Sue Lincoln
Giggly Roots Gardens
Willow, AK

Weeds. They come in all shapes, sizes, colors and self-preservation methods. Some have the capacity to propagate profusely while others linger in the field lolling away the summer subtly extracting nutrients and stealing sunshine only to explode into a mass of seeds when least expected. There are several weeds that are on my 'grab and bag' at all occurrences list. This means, dismount the tractor, stop whatever you are doing and immediately remove the seedling (it better not be anything bigger than a seedling) from the soil, secure it in a plastic bag, and remove it from the field.

Here are my most notorious:



Fireweed, first year plant to left, second year plant above. Photos by Sue Lincoln



Fireweed. The lovely fireweed. Such a benign looking seedling and is easy to remove at this stage. Let it grow and it will become a monstrous continuous length of multiple plants all along its underground stem.

Each with the capacity of surviving on its own if separated from the main stem, whereupon, it will produce its own underground stem with plantlets all along it. Left to grow in the field, it will grow tall and shade the peonies depriving them of needed sunlight.

Mustard. I just don't like it. It produces an abundance of seeds and has a 'tap root' that makes it difficult to extract from the soil.



Mustard

Plantain. This one creates a rosette of thick wide leaves. The root system is fibrous and extends well beyond the leaf canopy competing with the fibrous roots of the peony.



Plantain



Above and to left: pineapple weed. Above: pineapple weed seedling.

Pineapple weed. I love this one. Too bad it is a weed! It smells great and has fine frilly leaves. However, it too competes with peony roots and has a tendency to create shade if allowed to grow unchecked.

Shepherd's Purse. Lots of seeds and a deep root. I used to eat the seed pods when I was a kid. They taste peppery!



Shepherd's Purse

Dandelion. We all know this one. Lots and lots of seeds with a very deep tap root.



Dandelion



Grasses and Sedges: Lots of seeds. Easy to remove as seedlings. Let them go for a year or more and the root system goes on forever. Grasses with underground stems are the hardest to control since they crawl in all directions.



Above to left: Grass seedling. Above to right: Sedge. To left: Annual bluegrass.

Trees and shrub seedlings.

Again, easy to remove the first year. Subsequent years give the plant time to set the roots firmly. Caution must be taken when pulling to make sure the peony root area is not disturbed during weed extraction.



Elderberry



To left: Birch seedling. To right: Wild raspberry



To left: Willow. To right: Wild current

Non-vascular plants such as **liverworts and mosses** create a mat on the soil surface preventing moisture and nutrients from moving into the soil. They are very interesting and beautiful organisms. However, they spread rapidly, especially during wet conditions, and can get out of hand in a split second. The only 'good' about them is that they create such a thick mat that no other weed can get to the soil to take root. Too bad they have too many other 'cons' to allow them a foot-hold!



Liverworts

These are some of my most irritating weeds. There are many more, such as Common Groundsel, and other annual weeds. I can't tell you how to rid your field of these opportunists – that is a decision you must make. I pull them out, hoe them up, wilt them or burn them; others use pre-emergent and other herbicides, mulches, and even geese. Whatever you do, you must stay on top of weed occurrences. Peonies do not like competition. They would rather 'walk away' than compete for nutrients, water, and space. So give them the best, and they will be the best!

Peony Coop in the Mat-Su Valley by Martha Lojewski

Peony farmers from Anchorage, Eagle River, Palmer, Wasilla, Willow and Trapper Creek have begun the process of creating a cooperative business for all interested farmers to utilize. We are in the investigative and feasibility stage at this point in time using volunteers on committees to share the work load.

We have met three times and accomplished quite a bit in a short amount of time. An e-mail account was created, matsu.peony.coop@gmail.com. We did a survey to decide the direction our potential members want to pursue. Andrew Crow also came to one of our meetings to give us background information on basic coop models. He was recently at a coop convention in Wisconsin and set up for a lady named Margaret Lund to come to Alaska in the beginning of June. We are very excited to attend her seminar, if you would like to be notified of her dates of travel please contact us and we will make sure you are aware of her class.

The results of the survey were promising.

- 13 farms showed interest in forming a coop
- The coop should handle marketing and be a source for supplies
- Several people want the coop to form as soon as possible, others when it is ready, and others in 2016
- Approximately 24,000 plants will be in the ground by the fall of 2014
- Four farmers have 4,000 plants three years old and older this year with the majority farms coming online in the next 3-4 years
- The peony crop will reach 64,000 stems in three years
- Farms are fairly evenly located from Trapper Creek to Palmer

With this information we will be investigating a multi-stage coop, in which the services provided by the coop will grow as membership in the coop and it's available product to sell goes up.

If you are interested in helping the coop start up, want to be informed of the progress made by the coop committee, added to an e-mail list, or have questions please don't hesitate to contact us.

With high hopes to our fellow farmers,
The Mat Su Peony Growers
marthalojewski@gmail.com

A General Update

by Rita Jo Schultz

I have a theory that if I keep good enough records, someday I'll be able to predict things like what dates we will start harvesting our peony. And of course along with that deduction will be when we can start promising brides we will be able to deliver their 'forever' dream of peony for their weddings. After 8 years, we're still working on that project.

What we can say from these years of recording however is this spring on May 24th, we were 26 days ahead of last year. We know that because we count how many peony are out of the ground every week for 4 straight weeks. What we still have no clue about is if that equates to 26 days ahead of last year's harvest date. I doubt it very seriously. I believe the cool period we are experiencing now will slow things down a bit. My fellow growers who are on top of the ridge are sure about that since they had snow yesterday and hail today!!

We 'only' had the horrible winds and drenching rains that laid our peony almost to the ground. What we learned from this experience is the peony planted north to south with the prevailing winds coming out of the south have already straightened and look great. So the slight breeze today dried up the foliage and the sun following perked all these great guys up within 3 hours. The heavier stems with bigger buds such as Red Charm are still a bit weepy but I'm confident they too will be straight enough to harvest.

Our other fields that run east and west are not 'perking' up quite so fast. These are Duchess mostly and they are pretty tall with lots of buds. I know with growth spurts you can get curvy stems that later straighten so I'm hoping this will be true with these wind swept guys and a few days of sun. Of course we immediately restrung all our wooden stakes for the season to take the pressure off all these tall stems. Unfortunately we didn't get the message of the 26 days early and adjust our staking process. Our newer fields had never been staked so we are all over that right now. With a ton of wood lying around our place from previous projects, we make one tall stake and staple on two cross pieces at levels of about 1 and 2 feet. We put the lower string up now and the upper string a bit later as the stems grow in length.

Our winter was very mild here with little snow cover. So one would think we would suffer losses. They've never looked better. So once again we are perplexed but of course very happy and grateful. Maybe if we don't have a wet fall, and we don't get too cold, we don't have to have

a good snow cover?? Peony are hardy to -30F so that 'sort of' makes sense.

I also keep a record of when and where any botrytis shows up in our fields. We are fortunate to not have much but it does show up every once in a while. Of course we are very careful to remove it completely from the fields, making sure we put it in plastic sacks immediately as the spores are like dust and can contaminate other plants quickly. I try to pull the stem out as close to the root as possible. I discovered we have had botrytis in a row of Walter Faxon for 3 years now in the same area. So today I dug up those roots completely and removed them from our fields. Not sure if that is what a person should do, but it makes sense.

I started going through the fields today pulling off any bud blast. Those are the brown tiny buds that will never make a blossom. Each stem is capable of making a bloom but sometimes the plant just runs out of energy and the 'would be' bud turns brown. Technically I don't believe bud blast is the correct terminology but it is the common terminology. I've seen over and over these brown nubbins be the beginning of botrytis. So we always remove them as quickly as we can get the time.

At the same time as I remove the bud blasts I've do the side disbudding. Some varieties have more than one bud per stem. While there is a trend starting now to leave those side buds on and have a 'group' of blooms on a stem, I think most of our customers are still looking for that huge single bloom. So we take all the little buds off each stem and leave only the largest bud to mature. If your timing is exact you should be able to pop these little side buds off clean and quickly with just a twist of your fingers. You know there are some wonderful varieties that have no side buds! Maybe that is the next record keeping project for me.

The race is on and even though we have many hours of daylight, there isn't enough to get all the jobs done right now. I'm afraid this state of affairs will not stop until about October 1st. In the meantime, I am loving every very-long minute of my days. Having a few dozen peony blooming in our high tunnel keeps me going when I'm dragging a bit. The photo is of Festiva Maxima. If you can see the ruler, it is 8.5 inches. I can live with a little red fleck in a white peony this huge and so fragrant. How about you?

We are planning a WUSATA event in mid-August. Both the Branding program and the International program will be presented in Homer. More on that later.

Rita Jo Shoultz owns Alaska Perfect Peony (APP) along with her Husband Leroy and Son Shannon and his Wife Diane. They have lived on their farm for 48 years and

started with 3,500 peony in 2006. Their farm has about 15,000 peony in the ground now. This is their 5th year shipping. APP has a potted peony program and also sells tubers/roots.

Risk Management Education Partnerships Program from Jo Lynne Seufer

Greetings everyone... wanted to send and share---as per our current RME partnership announcement (<http://www.rma.usda.gov/aboutrma/agreements>). Applications must be electronically submitted: <http://rvs.umn.edu/Home.aspx>

Subject: 2014 Risk Management Education Application Webinars

The Risk Management Education Division has scheduled two webinars on the application process for applicants who want to submit proposals under the RMA Risk Management Education Partnership Program and/or the Crop Insurance Education in Targeted States Program.

The first webinar was on June 5. The second webinar was June 12. You may view a taped version after June 12.

The Federal Crop Insurance Corporation (FCIC), operating through the Risk Management Agency (RMA), announces its intent to award approximately \$2,000,000 to fund the Risk Management Education Partnerships Program.

Questions may be forwarded to USDA-RMA-RME, phone: 202-720-0779, e-mail: RMA.Risk-Ed@rma.usda.gov. You may also obtain information regarding this announcement from the RMA Web site at: <http://www.rma.usda.gov/aboutrma/agreements>.

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Field tours set for Interior Peony Growers

Arctic Alaska Peonies and other Interior peony growers are hosting the second annual Peony Farm Tour July 25th and 26th in the Fairbanks and surrounding communities. We will be touring over ten farms and will have experts from Alaska and Lower 48 sharing their knowledge. For registration information go to arctic-alaskapeonies.com - upcoming events or contact marji@northpolepeonies.com