



# Alaska Peony Growers Association Newsletter

Spring/Summer 2015

## Calendar

June 30 – July 2, 9 am – noon daily  
Harvester Certification Training, North Pole Peonies farm and GBG, REGISTRATION REQUIRED

July 24, 25, Interior Summer Farm Tour, REGISTRATION REQUIRED

Jan 28-31, 2016 APGA Winter Conference, Fairbanks, AK

## A few thoughts from our farm, Alaska Perfect Peony by Rita Jo Shoultz

*(Rita Jo, her Husband and Leroy and Son Shannon Shoultz manage their farm in Fritz Creek, just outside Homer. One of Alaska's oldest commercial cut flower farm, it was started in 2006 with 3,500 stems. The farm now has approximately 15,000 plants scattered in 5 fields on their 27 acre farm.)*

### Staking

A long time ago it was discovered raspberries have a higher production rate when given some support, e.g. staking or trellising. The theory is it takes less energy to stand upright with the support allowing the energy to go into the fruit production.

We stake our peony because we are trying to produce straight stems, to keep them from falling in the isles and making it difficult to harvest, and I believe this practice also allows more energy to be channeled into bud production. There are many choices and methods for staking peony.

#### 1. Using electrical stakes



Stakes now in use on the farm



Twine ready to be put in place as peonies grow.

Recently at our farm in Indiana we found the share croppers were using a fiberglass post and a special clip to hold the twine/string. I asked Todd at Alaska Mill and Feed to find a source and pricing for these stakes for peony growers. Currently our fields are all staked with cross

wood pieces and bailing twine. We had tons of wood around from our construction days and other projects so it was free. The T boards are every 75 feet but in-between those big stakes we have single stakes. These smaller stakes seem to deteriorate after one season. These new fiberglass stakes will be a permanent solution.

#### 2. When you stake is very important.

We put the first lower strings out as soon as we have finished our first spring weed control and fertilizer applications. We put the second string up as soon as the stems are up about 7 or 8 inches or sooner if we have time. We remove all the bailing twine in the fall before we cut back for winter. We reuse the twine several years.

### How Many Stems to Harvest

How many stems should we leave behind to nurture the plant for health and future production? Many growing manuals say 3-5 stems. Some folks say 50%. We rarely

have to make those decisions with our mature plants. The plants seem to have a mind of their own and decide for us. First of all, even though each stem has the capacity to make a bud, many don't because the roots just don't have enough 'juice'. Then there is the bud that never was meant to be. You know that ugly one. So we deadhead that one and there is another stem to take in nutrients. Then of course try as we may, we never catch every bud at exactly the right time so we have buds that are too far open. Those are deadheaded too. Those little brown nubbins have to go immediately as they can be the start of Botrytis.

Unless your plants are very young, how many stems to

leave is usually a no brainer. If you have young plants it is more critical to leave at least five stems. Sometimes new plants only have five stems. Deadhead those buds ASAP.

### Deadheading

Speaking of deadheading, it is imperative, super important, must do, to remove all flowers you are not going to harvest. These flowers are a huge attraction for bad bugs. Thrips love white open flowers. And thrips will travel throughout your field and infect the buds you hope to harvest. Keeping a sanitation program going in your fields is another one of those chores most anyone can do, so assign it and get it done.

## Which Variety and Where Do I Shop by Rita Jo Shoultz

*(Rita Jo, her Husband Leroy and Son Shannon farm in Fritz Creek Alaska, just outside Homer. Rita Jo was the recipient of the APGA Grower's Cup in 2014.)*

We just downloaded a new section on our web site [www.alaskaperfectpeony.com](http://www.alaskaperfectpeony.com) ROOTS-with a comprehensive list of varieties, pictures and their attributes for Alaska growers. It took a lot of work to get this list compiled using information provided by Alaska growers and our own experiences. I think it may be the most extensive-in one place-easy to read and access- list available for Alaska growers.

If you have time, check out the web site and go to the root section. You'll find pictures of all the varieties Alaskans are growing, 'how to' notes and why you should or shouldn't grow these varieties. Based on the many, many phone calls I get about varieties and the questions all beginning or expanding peony farmers have, I think this list is appropriate. And for those of you who have time to read the history, here it is.

A hundred years or so ago, Dr. Pat and I were having lunch at the University's Culinary School catching up on what we had been doing. I told her about my newest of the 500 Alaska Hardy® perennials I was growing for the season for my retail greenhouse, Fritz Creek Gardens, and Pat told me about the theories she had about growing peony in Alaska for the commercial cut flower industry and her experiences at GBG. She said 'I think you should try this'.

My first challenge was finding a source for the 3,500 roots I wanted for my first venture. So I called John Vandenberg who supplied me with perennials for FCG. John said 'I'm involved with a root grower in Oregon that has 20 acres of peony.' That was the beginning of my relationship with Oregon Perennials and Piet, Andre and Inge Wierstra. Piet was totally dedicated to making sure I was successful.

He flew up the second and third year, staying with us and hanging out in our fields.

With the industry growing so quickly, Piet eventually started selling out of certain popular varieties each season, thus my search for additional root growers. There are many smaller root growers throughout the USA so that an Alaska grower can find a few varieties in good quantities. Some growers started having bad experiences with receiving roots that weren't in the best of shape and with lots of rogues, varieties that weren't true to name. I remembered buying peony and other perennials from some of my Dutch connections and started researching that possibility.

Today I can also recommend DeVroomen from the Netherlands. I've known Jack DeVroomen for 25 years. I have visited their farm and met his family. The varieties are true with no rogues and the roots are guaranteed. I felt having a representative in Alaska to follow through with the growers, helping them make decisions on varieties, answering their growing questions and so forth would be beneficial. DeVroomen grows close to 400,000 plants representing

**Unique Harvest Practice**  
A two year old peony plant is divided into two roots. One half is planted back into our growing on fields for two years. The other half is planted in another field and after one year is harvested as a 3.25 year plant and then exported. This practice ensures the freshly dug root will not have any excessive old roots or division damage and the young root will be full of new energy. About 80% of our peonies are grown and offered this way.

**DeVroomen's Peony Fields**  
DeVroomen grows close to 400,000 plants representing more than 50 varieties at any one time. We grow the peonies in the sandy coastal soils of The Netherlands in a two year growing cycle using the best possible soil quality for shipping as well as a constant supply from year to year. We also sell peony seed from other select growers to offer the best assortment of varieties. We are continuously looking for new and better plants to add to our nursery.

**Hot Water Treatment**  
We harvest our roots as late as possible to ensure the foliage has died, putting all the energy back into the roots, and the plant is dormant. We wash the plants, give them a hot water treatment and pack them for shipping.

**Alaska Prices**  
Because of the very large geographical size of Alaska and the extreme high costs of freight, DeVroomen's prices include and reflect the costs of freight. This system allows a root buyer to budget more accurately leaving the total costs for obtaining these roots.

**Catalogue & Marketing Support**  
DeVroomen's on-line catalogue has beautiful pictures of all the varieties and allows customers the use of their photos for marketing. The information about the varieties, how to grow and other tips is invaluable. [www.devroomen.com](http://www.devroomen.com)



*Above and to right: DeVroomen fields, To right bottom: Shannon Schoultz taking inventory after root delivery*

more than 50 varieties at any one time. Their unique harvest practice was the determining factor for me. Great people too and they welcome visitors to their farms.

### **DeVroomen's Unique Harvest Practice**

A two year old peony plant is divided into two roots. One half is planted back into the growing on fields for two years. The other half is planted in another field and after one year the entire plant is harvested as a 3/5 eye plant then exported. This practice ensures the freshly dug root will not have any excessive old roots or division damage and the young root will be full of new energy. About 80% of DeVroomen peonies are grown and offered this way.

Rachel Christie brought up a point that wasn't even on my radar. Some root growers are also cut flower growers. So they cut the flowers during the season, then dig up these perhaps more tired roots and divide and sell them. Hmmmm, one more consideration.

### **Hot Water Treatment**

DeVroomens harvest their roots as late as possible to ensure the foliage has died, putting all the energy back into the roots, and the plant is dormant. They wash the plants, give them a hot water treatment and pack them for shipping. This treatment ensures the roots will have no viruses or nematodes. I especially liked this (In the USA Oregon Perennials also does this) because I definitely do not want to ever be responsible for bringing a critter (nematode) into Alaska that might decimate our potato crops or other devastating results.

When bringing roots into the USA from a foreign country, all sorts of inspections take place. This furthered my confidence in knowing I was not taking any chances with Alaska's pristine environment.



## Freight Prices Included

Getting our roots to Alaska is expensive. New growers are challenged with not only finding the right varieties; they then have to figure the shipping strategies. While a root might be a certain price from the Eastern part of the USA, often shipping makes those prices not competitive. That's another reason I liked the DeVroomen program. All prices stated include shipping to Alaska. Two locations are used for delivery, Anchorage and Fairbanks. This system allows a root buyer to budget more accurately knowing the total costs for obtaining their roots.

I'm very proud of the new section of our web site that has all this information about varieties. No matter where you are planning to purchase your roots, you can look at our web site and get tons of variety information based on Alaska growing conditions. I hope you enjoy the new section.



Thanks APGA from Rita Jo

What a total surprise to receive the Alaska Peony Growers Association Grower's Cup 2014. I was totally unprepared. For those of you who know me, you know I always am totally prepared for presentations with lots of 'props' including Power Points. The first thing that came to mind when I stepped up to the podium was 'I don't have a Power Point for this'. Of course I had to ask Marji if I could thank everyone the next day. I was too flabbergasted and overcome to thank everyone the day of the presentation.

The trip home on the plane and in the airports carrying around my cup received a lot of looks. I carried the cup proudly. I'm not sure how my traveling companions felt about all the attention however.

The Cup reads 'In Recognition of Your Outstanding Contribution to the Alaska Peony Cut Flower Industry.' Thanks again for this total honor. I promise to try to live up to the award.



Hey Peony Growers!  
from Sierra Hunsaker  
Wildberry Meadows, LLC.  
Meadow Lakes, AK

If you didn't get a chance to go to the APGA conference this year, you missed out. It was a deluge of information from some of the best minds in the Alaska horticulture, agriculture, and business risk management. I was impressed with the science and expertise presented and really appreciated the Right Risk Resources that were made available. As a new farmer, this kind of support is invaluable, and I'm so glad to have it.

I'd have to say my favorite part was meeting and mingling with other farmers in various stages of progress across the state and in my region. I left the conference with new friends who are just as adventurous and excited as I am. It

was an amazing opportunity, and I really feel like I gained so much from others who shared their experiences within this blossoming industry.

If you are also a new peony farmer, or thinking about becoming one, I highly recommend attending the conferences for the support and resource foundation they offer. My family and I began searching for property two years ago and started from raw and wild Alaska forest. After this year of land clearing, soil amending and property development, we are proud to announce that we will be ready for roots in the spring of 2016! It's been a good journey to get to the starting line, and we are thrilled with the support we have had through the process. We certainly look forward to the adventure ahead of us.

Thank you all for being a part of it and being so willing to share your experience and support through the Alaska Peony Growers Association!

# When it rains, it pours: Tracking *Botrytis* infection during the Alaska peony growing season. By Andrea Garfinkel ([andrea.garfinkel@email.wsu.edu](mailto:andrea.garfinkel@email.wsu.edu)) and Gary Chastagner, Washington State University ([chastag@wsu.edu](mailto:chastag@wsu.edu))

Most Alaska peony growers cite *Botrytis* gray mold as their number one disease concern, and so it's not surprising that we've found *Botrytis* at almost all of the farms we have visited. While common, we don't have a good understanding of the environmental conditions that favor *Botrytis* infections throughout the growing season.

Weather is one of the most important factors dictating the development of *Botrytis* gray mold. As Alaska peony growers well know, the environmental conditions are different throughout the state. Due to this environmental variation, disease incidence and severity likely differs drastically from year-to-year and throughout the different peony production regions of Alaska.

Moisture is essential for the germination of *Botrytis* spores, the microscopic wind-blown propagules produced by the fungus, which land on plant foliage and cause disease. In the presence of prolonged periods of wetness, these spores germinate and infect peony foliage and flowers. When periods of wetness are combined with favorable temperatures, disease has the potential to develop at a rapid rate.

In order to better understand the risk of *Botrytis* disease development at farms in the major production regions in Alaska, this summer, we are tracking environmental conditions and disease development at four peony farms located in the Interior, Mat-Su, Soldotna, and Homer areas. Weather stations will also be set up at the University of Alaska Fairbanks peony research plots. These weather stations will be tracking temperature, rainfall, and leaf wet-

ness throughout the growing season. With help from the growers at each farm, we will be observing disease development from photographs taken at multiple times during the season. Similar data will also be collected at the WSU Puyallup peony research plots, two farms in Washington, and one farm in Oregon. Determining what environmental conditions correlate with *Botrytis* disease development at each farm will help give us a better idea of when *Botrytis* occurs in Alaska peony fields. Such knowledge can help growers anticipate disease and make informed management decisions based on the weather patterns in their area.

For any questions about our environmental monitoring or any of our *Botrytis* research, please contact us.

As always, we welcome any samples of peonies from your field having what you believe to be *Botrytis* or any other diseases you encounter. Please e-mail if you would like to send us samples.



A weather station set up to measure temperature, rainfall, and leaf wetness at a peony farm in Washington. Similar weather stations will be set up in major Alaska peony production regions to determine what environmental conditions correlate with *Botrytis* disease development.

WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY

## Do you have any ugly peonies?

Call us weird, but we kind of like them...



Leaf spots    Flower bud lesions    Shoot dieback    Basal stem decay

Contact...

The WSU Ornamental Plant Pathology program is conducting research on management of *Botrytis* gray mold in peonies that involves identifying *Botrytis* isolates from around the country.

So, if you grow peonies and see symptoms you think are associated with *Botrytis*... >

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# Alaska Peony Cooperative by Martha Lojewski

As we head into the 2015 growing season, Alaska Peony Cooperative (APC) is both honored and humbled by the opportunity to join the cooperative force that is sweeping the state.

Thanks to some impressive efforts by our founding members and amazing support from our peony community, APC officially incorporated on March 31st, 2015! It is APC's mission to grow and market premium Alaska-grown peonies while empowering our member-farms through education and resource sharing.

One of our founding member-farms, Country Peonies, spent a good portion of the winter on a marketing tour through the Lower 48, where they met with florists from California to Kentucky who are excited for the opportunity to work with big, beautiful Alaska grown peonies.

Behind the scenes, APC's website is in the final stages of development, and we are continuing to work on marketing and outreach to both clients and future member farms.



We are also pleased to announce our Summer Educational Series for APC members and non-members who are interested in growing peonies in the Mat-Su Valley. Starting in May, we will hold our APC meetings at various peony farms throughout the Mat-Su to provide hands on experience, knowledge sharing, and grower networking. If you are an experienced grower, just gathering information, or somewhere in between, we invite you to come learn with us!

For more information on Alaska Peony Cooperative or to join the email list for the Summer Educational Series, please contact Martha at [marthalojewski@gmail.com](mailto:marthalojewski@gmail.com).

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