Back to the Future—NZ 4 Years Later

By RITA JO SHOULTZ, ALASKA PERFECT PEONY

Editors Note: In 2008, Rita Jo Shoultz, Alaska Perfect Peony, visited New Zealand peony farms along with a few other APGA members. Last November she spent four weeks re-visiting those same NZ peony farms. She shares her 2012 experience and observations in this article.

I’m waiting myself for those results.

Upon my return to Alaska I sent pictures of the Xanthomonas to Dr. Pat Holloway. She shared with me that the first case of Xanthomonas in the USA showed up in Virginia this season. Dr. Pat feels we need to have some sort of ‘protection’ to keep possibly infected roots or product from entering Alaska. Stay tuned for that effort as I’m sure you will be hearing much more about this at the February Conference.

Arriving in New Zealand after many, many hours of traveling I was a bit disorientated. Expectations based on my 2008 visit also became a bit disorientating. Evidently, and thank goodness, I have learned a bit in the past 4 years so I wasn’t the bright eyed innocent new grower.

The people were the same fantastic, friendly, generous folks as I remembered and expected, but the peony fields were suffering with a bacterial disease called Xanthomonas. This disease had attacked all the farms I visited except one, more on that farm later. The New Zealand Association of Peony Growers, a very well organized group of growers, active and to be viewed with envy, were on it, working diligently with different types of sprays and practices. The day I left we were informed the research results were to be ‘posted’. That means in the mail.

After a couple of days of getting my bearings at Omeo’s I settled in for an amazing visit. I worked in the fields from early morning until evening. The NZ practices for harvesting are much different than what we are doing on several levels. First of all, the larger farms only cut once a day. This resulted in thousands of buds
opening in the field, not available for marketing. I spent one day for 5.5 hours deadheading Coral Sunset. (I was practically crying by the time I finished.) I wasn't alone in this effort. Three UofA Fairbanks students were working on the Omeo farm. They spent many more hours than myself deadheading. They couldn't bear to throw them away either, and they had the entire farm decorated in cut peonies, under trees, and in every container they could find.

In defense of the larger farms, they sell roots as well as cuts and possibly leave the plants to have some blooms for their 'open days' where folks come and walk the fields and order their roots for later. I wanted to make a note to my fellow Alaska growers, however, that leaving the buds to flower is an invitation for disease, thrips, and other problems.

We started our day at 7 AM with breakfast and gearing up for harvesting, grading, and packing. With most of the workers very experienced, many having returned for the 10th year or longer, everyone knew their jobs. I certainly hope that happens in Alaska! Reliable workers with experience. What a concept. Perhaps one of the reasons everyone returns is the comraderie. At 10 AM everyone, and I mean everyone, stops for 'smoko'. This term is a throw back for smoking breaks. Now, of course, there's no smoking, but the 'tea lady' supplies us with something (usually sweet) for a snack and tea. The 'tea lady' works in the house and does the morning and afternoon (3PM) tea, serves Tony, Judy and myself lunch, hangs out the laundry (no dryers please-waste of money) and a few other household chores. I liked that idea a lot!! The minimum wage there is $15 per hour. My exchange rate was: for every US $1, I received $1.16 (from the banks with no fees unlike the airport)

We finished our days by sharing meal preparation, discussing the day, and Tony and Judy answering my never-ending questions while their Daughter’s violin music played in the background. Their Daughter is a very talented professional violinist now in Germany. It was a real treat to see her in action through their collection of DVD’s.

Another big difference from Alaska is most of the farms are paper dependent. No Excel spreadsheets, no computer records. They have note books of records. I finally understood after a
week or so how that could work for them. They use exporters for marketing. So, after harvesting, grading, and packing, an entire pallet (usually about 5,000 cuts) is loaded into the ‘Chiller’ truck and off they go to the exporter. Done. No Fed Ex. No phone calls from the bride who wants pink to match her shoes. No boxes of 20 or 100 to the end user. So no records required. However with several middle men, all taking a portion of the proceeds, the price per stem is considerably less than our experiences.

Omeo’s do sell a small amount to the local market for special occasions, but the buyers come to the farm to pick up their beauties and visit the farm which is an annual event for many. Omeo also does a few direct sales through their local Post Office, but only a very limited amount.

It was cold. In the mornings it was 36F in the house and outside. Again, NZ folk are very frugal, with little heat in their homes. More blankets and a warm robe replaced central heating. I’m not sure how much fuel for the home costs but car gas is sold by the liter so you don’t go into total shock. I figured it out and it would be over $8 a gallon. The first few mornings

Tony ran sprinklers most of the night to keep the peony from freezing. It was a very late and cold spring for them.

When you’ve cut thousands of the same variety day after day, you start to get a feel for exactly when the bud is ready. Although I admit, it took a bit to understand (puff of air under the sepal, gloss, true color under second petal), but after total immersion I started to get a bit of confidence. Several experiences bear sharing. I didn’t know some plants can form both “open” and “closed” buds. Henry Bockstoce, a huge red, has both open and closed buds (photos above). After some overhead watering (which I don’t recommend) the buds were full of water which we shook off as we cut them with no problems occurring later. My theory about open buds is that wet whites will turn brown but reds are a bit more forgiving. At John and Jill’s (Altitude Peonies) they hang their wet whites upside down on wires, a part of their staking program (photo next page).

If you leave a minimum of 3,
better yet 5, stems on each plant to take up nutrition, peony will stay productive for many years. The Dr. Alexander’s pictured below are 27 years old.
They are beautiful, healthy, and producing. This contradicts most books I’ve read.

In addition to the devastation by Xanthomonas, I saw buds damaged by bumble bee nibbles . . .

. . . and roots dug up by rabbits . . .

. . . and split buds from botrytis, maybe as a result of overhead watering. All new experiences for me.
Staking methods seemed to be a personal decision as every farm was a bit different. Pictured is the electrical fencing option Omeo uses.

John and Jill have a more elaborate system due to the hail they receive late in the season. Note the black hail cloth in picture.

I spent several hours with John and Melissa Chambers at Carrick Farm, my peony idols. While in Alaska it takes 3 to 5 years to reach harvestable stages, the Chambers start harvesting at year two. They have a very simple but precise fertigation system that assures absolute perfection plus they have a soil preparation system that is the best. This was the only farm I saw without any Xanthomonas. When talking to the eight grading shed ladies at Omeo, I asked who was their favorite grower and they all agreed it was the Chamber farm. Their buds are the largest, they have the most consistent sizes and are healthy, and the foliage is always spotless. Both John and Melissa have full time jobs. They accumulate all their work off time and take it for the peony season. They do not hire any help. They have approximately 3,500 peonies in their field.

I saw a small, inexpensive solution to the thrips problem. John and Jill had a Hurricane fogger that puts out a very fine mist. The machine label said it was for hotels and motels (I assume for bed bugs). After removing foliage and putting the warm peony in their water buckets, they put them in an old, nonfunctioning small cooler about 4x4. They closed them up in the cooler and applied a
few seconds of Vantage. They have eliminated any bug problems with this simple procedure. Alaska may not be approved for Vantage but I’m sure we can solve that problem.

Several farms bring their harvest to Omeo for grading, packing and marketing for a fee. It was a bonus to meet them and talk about some of their practices. One farm, Rusty and Jerry’s was fun to visit. They have worked their fields all their lives, being the only income they have. They ‘invent’ machines and practices for their particular needs. One ‘invention’ was a weed burner Rusty could carry on her back easily. Being a total Alaskan I appreciated and loved their inventions.

I most likely will not go back to New Zealand. I think I’ve learned what I can there. But I do recommend it to others. With cuts from probably 50,000 plants coming through the Omeo pack house, I was able to see and learn more than probably any other opportunity.

Kathy & Craig Baker also visited Omeo farms this fall, see their writeup on page 13.

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New Zealand (cont’d)

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BABBLE FROM THE BUMBLING FARMER

By MICHAEL WILLIAMS, EAGLE SONG FAMILY PEONY FARM

Sue Kent offered me this corner in the Newsletter recently. Her reasons are suspect. It could have been a joke gone awry, a way to corral my incessant barrage of articles, or could it be I have something intelligent to say . . . nah. Regardless, here I am for better or worse. It should be noted that what I write in my corner "Babble from the Bumbling Farmer" are my thoughts and those of the voices in my head and in no way reflect the views of the APGA or most other sane individuals.

LETS ADVERTISE ALASKA GROWN PEONIES

In 2013 an increasing number of Alaska peony growers will have stems to sell. It has been repeated too many times for me to count “the market is there for Alaska peonies... you have peonies when no others in the world do”. I like to believe that is true, so why do I feel panic sweep over me when I start thinking about where I will sell my peonies? It appears to me we have focused our energies into getting our farms started (rightfully so) thinking there is time to figure out where we will actually sell our stems later. For several farms the time has come and many more of you will follow in 2014 and beyond. Do any of you know exactly where your stems will be sold in 2013? If you don’t have the answer to that question you may be feeling the panic of which I speak. Does a vision of stems being left in the fields cross your mind? It’s a very real possibility.

I am no marketing guru, but I have owned a retail business for several
years and learned marketing and sales go hand in hand. I believe it is time Alaska peony growers get on the marketing train. We need a multi-faceted advertising campaign right now. I’m not talking about a couple of print ads here and there, but a coordinated campaign that targets wholesale buyers, florists, wedding/event planners - and let’s not overlook the general public.

We have this idea that a large flower wholesaler is the answer to all our problems. Why is a wholesaler going to buy large quantities of peonies if retail florists, brides, event planners, upscale resorts/hotels and John Q. Public think peonies don’t exist in July, August, and September? Don’t think that is the case??? Just Google wedding flowers and see what you can find for peonies in those months. Almost without exception the word is “not available in those months” and until now that was true. Go to some of the wedding blogs and do a search on peonies and you will read some really bizarre stuff. Most responses to brides that want peonies in those months is “honey, change your wedding date”. Yes, Yes, Yes, I do read the wedding blogs. I want to know what makes them tick and how we can get peony bouquets into their hands.

I see many peony farmers cringe when the subject of brides comes up. We’ve all heard of bridezilla and the hassle of catering to weddings. Stop and think about this though, the wedding industry is a $47 billion industry, with 2.5 million weddings in the U.S. annually, at an average price of over $29,000 per wedding. Oh, and by the way, 30% of those weddings take place in July, August and September. Do you think it is worth making the wedding industry aware of our peonies? You don’t have to sell directly to brides, but it would be prudent to advertise to them. Once the word it out I’m willing to wager we could increase those summer weddings to more than 30%, but we have to let the world know “Alaska harvests peonies in the summer”.

Do I think we need a professional ad campaign...you bet! Will it cost a significant amount of money...you bet! We are farmers though, we know about reaping what we sow. I think the Alaska Peony Growers Association (APGA) should consider taking the lead on a national advertising campaign. It was suggested to me that a professional ad agency is called for...absolutely! We growers need to take every opportunity to tell the country and the world what we have.

I had a rack card printed up that goes out with every order I send. It talks about Alaska’s unique peony industry, its season, the size of our blooms and shows contact information for our farm and the APGA.

Did you know that Ted Stevens Anchorage International Airport is the 2nd largest cargo hub in the U.S. and it is less than 9 ½ hours flight to 90% of the industrial world? We deal in a
The conference will feature six conference-wide sessions with six out-of-state speakers, including Andre Wierstra of Oregon Perennials; Dr. Beverly S. Gerdeman, PhD. Entomologist, Washington State University; Ko Klaver, Oregon, Perennials; Drs. Dave and Jill Russell; Todd Burkdoll, BASF; and 32 presenters from Alaska, including Rita Jo Shoultz on her trip to New Zealand. In addition to the conference-wide sessions, there will be 21 concurrent sessions and two round table sessions. A detailed listing of the conference presentations will be on the web site in early January.

The conference will also include both in- and out-of-state vendors, such as BASF, Dripworks, and Norlake, some offering special conference discounts. And building on the Summer Conference artist, there will be an Artists Show. The Silent Auction, a popular feature of each of the conferences will feature many wonderful items.

And don’t forget the Pre-conference Activities on February 13 featuring a New Growers School, an Intermediate Growers School, and a tour of the new UAF Green House and Peony Tissue Culture Research that Dr. Patricia Holloway is working on.

Please make your register for the conference NOW so you won’t miss it! We expect a wonderful crowd!

**Conference Hotel Information** – Please contact the Fairbanks Westmark Hotel and Conference Center (907) 456-7722. Mention that you are attending the APGA Conference and the room rate will be $75.00 plus tax ($81.00)

You can check out other housing options in Fairbanks follow this link:

http://www.explorefairbanks.com/

This site also links you to many other activities going on in Fairbanks the week of the conference. **
New Year Resolutions

A recent survey of our members resulted in the following top resolutions for 2013! Read them and be inspired!

Become more “marketing” savvy! (Kathy)
I think resolutions are foolish, If you can’t make life changes as they are needed why do you need to do it on a certain day of the year? (Bryan)
Get a farm loan. (Jennifer)
Get my first 500 plants into the ground. (Michelle)
Get Peony garden going. (Pat & Wayne)
Prepare soil for new peony plantings and prep beds for mixed garden veggies. (Lori)
Finish 12 chapters in my book. (Daisy Lee)
Get out on the cross country skis more. (Sue)
Get irrigation system purchased and on the ground ready for our first planting. (Ed & Annie)
Do a better job collecting data on the peonies various stages of growth. (Jan)
Eat more kale. (Lydia)
Healthier living and better documentation on my field. (Denise)
Plant 4000 peony roots in the fall. (Kary)
Get some land ready on my property for growing peonies! (Val)
Clear land and make rows for planting in 2014. (N)
Finish clearing the rest of our 3 acres and buy our first 50 roots. (Patty)
Make my farm my #1 business priority during the 2013 growing season. (Virginia)
Identify the “mystery disease” we have in our peony fields. (Sue)
Always, always cover my peonies in the fall --we have had no snow until now. (Tami)
Better manage my work load. (Michelle)
Be more focused in my life. (Ethel)
Install drainage in the field. Well, have Gary, install drainage in the field! ;-) (Sue)
Finding someone to turn up my property for under $5K. (Margie)
Retire in 2013 from my current job and create that home-based business. (John)
Get a pack/cooler house built. (Beth)
Take better care of my health because you can’t be an overnight success in the peony business. (Mike)
Plant some peonies and have them grow strong for years. (Jason)
Be more client and less busy. (Ko)
Put together in some sort of readable format all the info I’ve picked up the past 6 years for my peony business. (Rita Jo)
Keep ahead of weeds in my peony fields better than ever in 2013! (Suzanne)
Get 2 acres (apprx 2000) roots planted. (Steven)
Stop using my “fat pants” as pants. (If you publish my name, you will be sorry!) **
CHILLY ROOT FARM
From MICHELLE LA FRINIERE, HOMER

Now that we have substantial snow cover over the peony fields, I’m sleeping easier.

This is the first winter that the fields will go unmulched. It wasn’t my first choice, I don’t like it, and if I could have gotten the chore done I would have. Now I’ll hope for the best in this grand experiment and be watching for those red buds in the mud in June. We are fortunate in that Chilly Root is at an elevation and in a location where good snow cover isn’t a normal concern. It isn’t the middle of winter here that stresses perennial plants but the beginning and end of winter, when cold dry winds and deep freezing temps without snow cover can do the most damage. Early thaws that uncover plants, melts down the snow, then swings back to deep cold in the spring can be too much for even established plants. An insulating layer of straw or spruce boughs or soil/sand can be the difference between survival success or not. Well, heavy sigh, we’ll see how it goes.

This winter and spring we will be researching and building our chiller unit in the processing ‘Shop-Mahal’, our fondly named peony processing shop. Designing a work space with a logical processing layout has been made easier by visiting other established growers. There’s something to be gleaned from every kind of farm operation, even those not growing exclusively peonies.

EAGLE FARM FAMILY PEONY FARM
From MIKE WILLIAMS, WASILLA

If you were at the summer peony conference in Palmer you may have heard Craig Baker of Gray Owl Farm talk about his walk-in cooler. He uses a Coolbot and window air conditioner. The Coolbot is easy enough to get, but air conditioners in Alaska …a little more difficult. I believe he ended up having his brother ship one up from the lower 48.

Lowe’s and Home Depot carry air conditioners, but they acted like I was asking them to ship up snowballs in January rather than a 15,000 btu air conditioner.

Well, did you know that you can order your Coolbot and air conditioner through amazon.com? Not only that, you can get free super saver shipping. All of that costs about $754.

Go to www.storeitcold.com/ first to learn all about Coolbot, the appropriate air conditioner and even how to build a cooler.

FOX HOLLOW ENTERPRISES
From WANDA HAKEN, NENANA

Most of us in Alaska are involved in growing peonies for cut flower sales. Last spring I had the opportunity to visit a farm that grows peony roots for retail and wholesale markets! Last April, while on a college-visiting trip with my son, Trevor, I did some checking to see if we would be driving by any peony farms while in the Midwest area. Lucky for me, it turned out that we were going to be driving very close to Klehm’s Song Sparrow farm in southern Wisconsin. Klehm’s Song Sparrow grows peony roots for sale, along with a lot of other flowers and landscape plants.
Roy KIehm, the owner of Song Sparrow farm, is a 3rd generation farmer and has developed many peony cultivars. He has hybridized a number of varieties that we are familiar with such as Coral Charm and Pink Hawaiian Coral. Some of you may remember that Roy was one of our main speakers at the Spring 2011 Peony Growers Conference. Song Sparrow doesn’t usually give farm tours, but when I told them that I was one of the “Alaska peony growers” they were more than happy to give me a tour! Thank goodness for Google Maps as I was able to find it without too much trouble! (They do not have a sign out front!) I was given a tour of the farm by their head foreman.

As you can see by this photo, they plant their peony roots in 4 ft wide plots. The roots are planted relatively close together since they harvest the roots after 2 or 3 years growth.

This is a cultivar called “Old Faithful” coming for the first year. They label their plots with white label stakes. The foreman told me they have started to use a numbering system to label the plots in place of the actual peony names because they are starting to have trouble with people sneaking in at night stealing the more expensive roots!
This is a plot of two-year-old Pink Hawaiians!

The foreman told me his favorite peony is called "Moon Over Barrington, hybridized by Roy Klehm. He says it has huge, white, very fragrant blooms.

Acres and acres of peony roots! Maybe some of them will find their way in to our peony fields! If you have never checked out Song Sparrow, their website is:


I like their website because you can sort their peony offerings by a number of categories such as which varieties are good for cut flowers.
GRAY OWL FARM
From KATHY BAKER, PALMER

We had a fabulous opportunity to work on Omeo Peonies farm in Alexandra, New Zealand during the last week of November. Judy and Tony Banks generously offered us housing and meals, and graciously allowed us to work with them and all of their beautiful staff during their peak harvest period. We felt like family in the process and found immeasurable knowledge in the process.

If only I could do a “Vulcan Mind Meld” with Judy as she is astounding to observe while she moves through her fields of blooms knowing exactly which buds to take and which ones will wait until tomorrow. I am still in awe!

They gave us experience in harvesting, post-harvest handling in the fields, preparation of buds for “Long Life” (long term storage), grading shed activities, and the pack house routines (boxing for shipping). The hands on experience they shared with us will be so valuable as we move into our own mini-operation.

Craig spent the majority of time working in the chiller at “Long Life” and my time was in the harvest fields, but I am ever so proud that Craig made an excellent “Bridesmaid” and chief entertainer for the harvest crew in the afternoons.

It is truly an experience to learn to drive a stick shift in the opposite way we are accustomed. Judy and Tony became good friends and even took time out of their busy schedule to take us up to the dam in the mountains to share an evening picnic and a bottle of wine.

They live in a beautiful location, and we would love to return again someday to learn more and spend more time touring the south island of New Zealand. **
MIDNIGHT SUN PEONIES
From SUE KENT, STERLING

We don’t really have much to “say” this quarter, but we thought we’d share photos from last season showing some of our work, our little tests, and of course, our beautiful flowers.

The top two photos show a test we conducted to rid horsetail from a couple of rows where it had gotten out of control.

First we covered the peonies with plastic garbage bags and then sprayed the horsetail “groundcover” with a mixture of Roundup, ammonium sulfate, and surfactant. If you try this, do it on a cool day and don’t leave the peonies inside the bags too long, because they really respirate and will wilt.

Our field weeds, blooming in all their glory, in the neighboring property. Can we ever win?

We got our pole-barn all closed in and converted into our packhouse.

The second photo shows the dead horsetail, and you can see where we stopped spraying halfway up the bed. We’ll let you know next year how the peonies, as well as the horsetail, look.

Three Shirleys and a Clay!!!.
MIDNIGHT SUN PEONIES (cont’d)

These photos show our beautiful 4 year-old Red Charms from field bud, into the cooler, then bunched, packed, and boxed!

And here are our 3-year old Duchesse from field bud to vase.
We found that surveyor’s flagging and our iPhone cameras work well for our cooler and vase tests. We record dates and comments right on the flagging that is tied to the flower stem and then take photos every so often. These photos are invaluable the following year. (B U T stands for beautiful.)

Although the fall planting was challenging because of all the rain, we did get almost another 3,000 peonies planted, and the very last day of planting turned out to be an absolutely gorgeous day. It was a wonderful way to finish up the planting season.
My husband and I were fortunate to travel in Oregon and Washington this past summer to meet some of our peony root suppliers and see their operations. We spent 9 days in the Salem area attending a family wedding and we were able to foray to a few local farms. The Big Daddies of the Salem area are Oregon Perennial and Adelman’s. Andre at Oregon Perennial showed us his fields, root division operation, and root storage buildings. His operation is expansive to say the least. One fact he told me is that their roots are divided every two years.

Adelman’s is a large operation and is a good source for some rare and unusual roots, but they are quite expensive compared to Oregon Perennial. Seeing their fields in bloom in May must be a breathtaking sight.

We visited many smaller nurseries but most had weeds, limited varieties, and unhealthy looking plants although we did find some of the smaller growers very knowledgeable. In my opinion, if you are looking for a root supply, stick to the larger nurseries.

Just to change the subject for your consideration while we while away the time looking out the window at the -40 thermometer and catching the occasional outstanding programs on PBS, I watched a program called Oregon Wine: Grapes of Place which proved to be a Eureka moment. The program depicted a historical perspective of Pinot Noir grape cultivation on the vineyards in the Willamette Valley of Oregon. Our peony cultivation in Alaska is exactly like the development of the wineries in Willamette which started in the 1960’s. The following traits proved to be effective in developing this multimillion dollar business in Oregon: First, very learned vine growers who knew their product thoroughly; two, promotion and competition of their unique wine in a global context (France and California) third, they stuck together by helping each other out and focusing on common goals. That’s it! That’s what we need to do in Alaska. I bought this film and anyone can borrow it from me or you can order it on the PBS website.

We only have about 135 roots in the ground, mostly in the live and learn phase, but we did discover some things this past summer. To be honest and it is hard to admit, our roots look terrible. I planted some on Nestegg Farm which is on Vault Road just past the Hilltop Restaurant and they just withered in the soil getting a couple of dry brown buds. The thirty that I have at our home in Aurora did not fare any better. My soil in Aurora has been cultivated for several years and is of excellent garden quality. I used a soil mixture that I acquired somewhere, probably at a growers meeting. It consisted of digging a hole twenty inches deep and putting in a combined mixture of 1 gallon compost from Golden Heart Utilities, 1 gallon soil, 1 tbs borax, 1 tbs triple phosphate, and ¼ cup 8-32-16. Finally, I had this mixture tested and it proved to have toxic proportions. Jessica Guritz, a technician for Fairbanks Soil and Water Conservation, recommended that I use a shovel full of compost, a little lime, and very little boron. My point is that it is necessary to have your soil accurately tested and don’t be so generous with your fertilizer even though we love them to death.

Our field was virgin forest this past spring and we miscalculated the space needed to plant three thousand roots. Long story short, I have five hundred Sara Bernhardt’s for sale if anyone is interested. The Fairbanks area would be best, but just contact me.

We are in the process of setting up and buying an irrigation system. The emitter system on one of the farms in Mat-Su (which was located in a residential area, on a corner lot on a hill) seems to be the way to go for us. Unfortunately, I don’t remember which farm used this system on the farm tour in August, but if the farmer would contact me, we would appreciate it.

Finally, most of you have visited the Georgeson Botanical Garden (GBG)
NESTEGG PEONIES
(CONT’D)
on the western end of the UAF campus. Also, most of you know that nearly all peony research in the state of Alaska is done in the GBG garden by Dr. Pat Holloway. GBGS is a non profit organization that supports the garden in several ways. Currently we have an opening on the Board of Directors. If you are interested in serving on the Board, please contact me at marilynberglin@gmail.com or Jan Hanscom@mosquitonet.com. Or, if you are out of town or cannot serve on the board, we gladly accept support through the Pick, Click, Give Fund Dividend Program.

While we wait for the Peony Conference on Valentine’s Day weekend and look out the window waiting for the first snow melt, we wish you all the best in the new year.

NORTH POLE PEONIES
From MARJI ILLINGWORTH, FAIRBANKS
The sun rises at 11 am and it’s 50 below!!! Well it was on December 20th, but New Year’s promises to be much warmer and the light is coming back!
The last of 2012 was busy. Ron and I traveled to the Pacific North West in November. Our first stop was at Wierstra’s Oregon Perennials. Although it was rainy, it was a great change from the snow and cold we left in North Pole. For those of you with peonies on order for spring delivery, Andre showed them to us and they look great!

Andre showed us all around his operation, and he and Piet graciously answered so many questions! Although it was not growing season, it was still a beautiful farm and a marvelously well managed Agrabusiness!

That night we headed to the ASCFG Conference in Tacoma, WA. Pat Holloway presented her information on Alaska Peonies. Everyone was blown away and the rest of the conference, Alaska Peonies were mentioned in EVERY session! We were kept very busy “selling” Alaska Peonies!

Since our return from the conference, we have been busy working with the Interior peony growers to organize the APGA Winter Conference! It has been a busy process but all is going well. You should enjoy a great conference!

We also had another New Grower’s School in Fairbanks and then Carolyn Chapin, Ron and I did a test run of the Intermediate Growers School that will be presented at this winter’s APGA Conference. Both sessions were well attended.

We are anxiously looking forward to seeing you at the Winter APGA Conference! Happy New Year!!!
PIONEER PEONIES
From DENISE BOWLAND, WASILLA

Happy New Year from Pioneer Peonies.

Ron and I had a wonderful busy year. Our little haven produced an acre full of buds that were promptly popped off with the exception of about a dozen. We felt the need for some encouragement so we allowed a few to bloom. It’s a good thing we did because we discovered, after much conversing with others, that some of our Festivas are in fact Shirley Temples. It is what it is, and we think they are beautiful. We ordered more Festivas only to find out that we had Bowl of Creams. I fell in love all over again, so I am currently searching for a few more.

During the summer conference it was thought that we may have planted too shallow so we brought in a load of compost and mounded up. We also did a bit of lime and tucked it all in for winter.

We are already sold out this next year for a few local weddings. They understand it is our first year to harvest and sell and have agreed to take what we have. We are excited. They are excited too, so I think it is a win-win situation. We still pinch ourselves, in May, on how much fun we are having and kicking ourselves, in August, at the amount of work it is.

Thanks to all of you for continuing to support this little farm we have and the knowledge you share.**

Don’t forget to renew your APGA membership for 2013.

Go to www. alaskapeonies.org to register.
APGA Board Members

Ron Illingworth, President
Shelly Rainwater, Vice President
Virginia Young, Treasurer
Sue Kent, Secretary
Jan Hanscom, FBX
Rachel Christy, MATSU
Harry Davidson, MATSU
Richard Repper, SOL
Rita Jo Shoultz, HOM
Taffina Katkus, Associates’ Rep

IMPORTANT DATES

Jan 11  Growers 2013 dues must be paid to vote in Board elections
Jan 14-17  Board elections
Jan 17  Board meeting
Jan 31  2013 membership dues must be paid or members will be dropped from email and web site lists
Feb 13  Grower School, FBX
Feb 13  Board Meeting, FBX
Feb 14-15  Winter Conference, FBX

SAVE THESE DATES!
February 14 & 15, 2013
Alaska Peony Growers Winter Conference in FAIRBANKS!
Growing Peonies - From the Ground Up
New & Intermediate Growers School Feb 13