Alaska Peony Growers Association

NEWSLETTER

Fall 2017

2018 Annual Alaska Peony Conference

26-27 January, 2017 in Anchorage at the Sheraton Hotel

http://www.alaskapeonyconference.com

The 2018 Winter Conference website will be live in early October

OUR MISSION

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

PRE-CONFERENCE

New Growers Sessions on January 25th

✦ Marketing your flowers in Alaska, the U.S., and abroad
✦ Managing a flower farm and packhouse
✦ Post-harvest care
✦ Recent research in Alaska peonies
✦ And more informative topics

See page 5 for more details!

In This Issue

✦ Four Days Learning from the Pros at Oregon Perennial!
✦ All Grown Up
✦ A View from the Other Side of the Atlantic
✦ On Farm Research
✦ More 2018 Winter Conference details
Last year was my first year harvesting a larger amount of peonies. I had some difficulties managing both the picking and the processing and ended up missing a lot of peonies that did not get harvested. I realized I needed to get a better handle on both aspects, so I decided to go down and visit the “pro’s” – people who have been harvesting and processing peonies for years! I went down and spent 4 days harvesting and processing with the folks at Oregon Perennials in Woodburn, Oregon! Oregon Perennials is owned and operated by Piet and Andre Wierstra and Piet’s daughter, Inge. Many of us are familiar with them as they have been to our APGA conferences and many of us have bought roots from them.

Oregon Perennials has been working the last few years towards getting all their peonies under hoop houses. This is because the hoop houses speed up their maturation, allowing them to have peonies available for Mother’s Day. The peonies are planted very close together in order to maximize the space available. When you are harvesting, it’s like wading through a sea of peonies! While I was there, they were harvesting Paula Fay’s. Another couple from Alaska was also there learning on my first day there.

OP hires a crew of workers to help with harvesting and processing. A group of workers moves down the hoop house cutting. As soon as they have a handful, they pass the stems to other workers who are following them down the hoop house. When the 2nd workers have an armful of stems, they take them to the end of the hoop house where the stems are placed in buckets on a pallet on a trailer. The buckets have about an inch of chilled water in them. When the trailer is full, the buckets are taken to their processing shed. The pallet is lifted off the trailer with a forklift, then it’s placed inside a large chiller.

When all the picking is done for that round, the workers go to the processing shed, if they have time between pickings. The pallets are taken out of the chiller a few at a time. They have a set of 4 processing tables that all feed to a conveyor belt. The workers inspect the peonies, remove the bottom leaves, cut them to the proper length with a large stem cutter, and bundle them into groups of 10’s. The stems are then placed on the conveyor belt. At the end of the conveyor another worker places 10 bunches into clean buckets that are inside a big wood tote. The forklift then takes the tote back to the chiller. They can stack the totes quite high in their big chiller.

I learned a lot from watching how efficiently they do...
Supposedly after 11 years I know how to grow peony in my location. I’m not sure how accurate that statement is but let’s assume it’s correct. The plants are pretty mature so we have an idea about how many stems thus buds we will have to sell, and we pretty much know when they will be ready to harvest based on the last 11 year’s records. And we have the labor requirements pretty much figured out for our farm.

One of the most critical steps is when to harvest each bud but from meticulous notes we have created excel sheets with instructions for harvesting. Another critical but totally easy process is making sure your cold chain/post harvest procedures are precise. We are always looking for the perfect box but with 7 box sizes in the box house, we can make almost anything work.

Now it’s time to tweak expenses and make sure we are maximizing our profit margin. I’d like to say we did that the first day, but the first day we were overwhelmed with fertilizers, varieties, weeds, gel packs, boxes etc. etc. etc. Do you know what your expenses are and how much you need to charge for your stems to make it work?? I’m not talking about the $4 everyone thinks is the magic number because it definitely is not!! I’m talking about an accurate accounting.

Here is a partial list of some of the major expenses to take into consideration:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expense</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Labor</td>
<td>Our biggest expense but what makes everything work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advertising</td>
<td>We have experimented with all means and know what works for us, and it’s not an ad in a magazine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boxes</td>
<td>Dacron, J hooks, rubber bands, gel packs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet fees</td>
<td>Robly or your mass email company, web site, server fees, Intuit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Credit card fees</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fed Ex</td>
<td>Shipping costs, hopefully you are getting the 69.5% discount</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dues and Subscriptions</td>
<td>Certified American Grown, ASCFG, APGA, Farm Bureau, Garden Clubs—they add up.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utilities</td>
<td>electric, phone land and cell, heat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gas/Fuel</td>
<td>For all equipment and vehicles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taxes</td>
<td>Property and payroll taxes, sales tax, income tax</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insurance</td>
<td>Workman’s comp, farm liability, vehicle, real property)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintenance</td>
<td>equipment, packhouse, fields</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We know what it cost us per stem. Do you? If not, you can’t make a knowledgeable decision on your pricing. While growing them is so much fun, the accounting is where the make or break decisions are made. There are tons of classes, web seminars and books to read readily available to help you. We are growing up and need to be business people now.
During my recent travels to The Netherlands in early June I had the opportunity to stop and check out several peony cut flower growers and fields. Here is my report.

It is obvious those peonies are still at a steady increase in acreage in the Netherlands. There is no slowing down in the cut flower production and the appetite for newer varieties is still at a high level. Growers are constantly looking for better producing varieties, with less or no side buds and with flower holding power.

Not every variety works the same in each region, certain varieties seem to grow better in the clay soil and produce gorgeous large flowers, others like lighter soils.

Certain varieties, that I am familiar with in the USA, I do have to take a double check on when in Holland, because they look so different compared to what I am used to seeing in the continental US. I do think there is a lot of similarity in flower color and look between the Dutch and the Kenai Peninsula flowers, since the climates in growing season are very similar. No wonder that sometimes we think we got shipped the wrong variety, it can just be the outcome of a different environment.

Alaska Grown peonies still have a long way to go to make a significant impact in the world peony cut flower market, but it is making in-roads, and a lot of folks in Europe are talking about Alaska peonies. Just about every day during my two weeks in Holland, the question came up: ‘How are the Alaska Peony Growers doing out there’? My standard and usual answer is. ‘They Are Growing’ and leave it at that.

Rough estimated numbers (not 100% verified) from the Netherlands are that the Dutch peony cut flower growers did cut 125+ million stems in 2017. That is about 42% of the estimated 300 million stems of peony flowers that are cut world-wide.

About 50% of the Dutch Peonies go through the traditional flower auction and the other half is sold direct to retail-distributors and export- distribution companies. About 25% of the peonies that went through the Dutch auction system so far were Sarah Bernhardts. It is the staple variety of the peony industry.

Average stem price in Dutch Auctions

- Sarah Bernhardt = 0.453 Euro-cents (~ 0.54 USD).
- Duchesse D’Nemours = 0.530 Euro-cents (~ 0.63 USD).
- Madame Claude Tain = $0.853 Euro-cents (~ 1.02 USD).

This is Dutch data based through week-38 auction statistic that I was able to review.

Currently I see only Etched Salmon, Coral Charm, Bowl of Cream and Red Charm to be getting more than 1-Euro per stem at the Flower auction, but not all the time. Bad quality or mediocre quality does get minimal pricing, or does not get purchased.

Some of the most popular cut-flower volume peony production varieties in Holland:

1. Sarah Bernhardt (by far the largest)
2. Duchesse D’ Nemours
3. Festiva Maxima
4. Jacorma
5. Pietertje Vriend Wagenaar (aka. The Fawn)

Continued on Page 6...
On Farm Research

By: Ron Illingworth

Conducting on-farm research is something that each of us should consider. It can be relatively simple or more complex. Projects can range from keeping track of the impact of watering more frequently, increasing the amount of fertilizer applied, to any methods you might use to improve your products life after harvest. The key, of course, is in keeping records.

Keep records of everything. When does your harvest start? What was the weather like? Did you have a cool or warm summer preceding harvest? When did you apply botrytis spray? How frequently? What bugs did you see? What did your soil sample tell you this year? Last year? What changed? Why? Gathering information such as this helps you to make improvements in your practice and in your product.

At North Pole Peonies, we started an on-farm research project involving the use of ozone generators. My hypothesis is that periodic application of ozone in our chiller will reduce the incidence of botrytis in the chiller. I am tracking the dates of application, the length of time for each application, and the result of inspection of stems/buds for botrytis.

Before starting this project, I did a literature search to see what I could find about the use of ozone with peonies or cut flowers. It turns out that, while there was no published research on the use of airborne ozone with peonies in the chiller, there was some research with other cut flowers, and significant research in using ozone in other industries such as hospitals, hospitality, and vegetable and fruits. My question then became, is this transferable? Can I replicate it with peonies? At the end of the season, we’ll analyze the data and see what shows up.

2018 Winter Conference

By: Gary Lincoln

It’s almost that time of year again - Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Years and the 2018 APGA Winter Conference. The Winter Conference will be held at the Sheraton Anchorage Hotel and Spa January 25-28, 2018. The hotel is located at 401 E 6th Ave, Anchorage, AK.

The conference will follow the same pattern as past conferences and will consist of a growers school on Thursday, the conference proper on Friday and Saturday, and another session on Sunday. Michael LoBue, CEO of the California Association of Flower Growers and Shippers will provide the keynote address. Also scheduled are sessions on marketing and branding from the UAA Management and Marketing program. Kelly Perry from Team Flower will be discussing issues from the customer’s perspective. You can find out more about Kelly at teamflower.org and Michael at CAFGS.org.

Pre-conference sessions will cost $40 for members and $50 for non-members. The conference member price is $225 for both days and $125 for a single day if signed up by December 31st. Otherwise there is a $50 late registration fee. Non-members will pay $275 for both days and $150 for a single day and late registration after December 31st. The cost of the Sunday session is yet to be determined. The cost of the Friday night banquet will be approximately $50.

You can make hotel reservations at any time by inserting this link into a web browser: https://www.starwoodmeeting.com/events/start.action?id=1709142289&key=2F78CCC4. Or, you can call the hotel at 907.276.8700 or 907.343.3157 and identify yourself as being part of the group, Alaska Peony Growers Association 2018 Annual Meeting. Room Rates are; Standard rooms at $95/night and Club level 125 $125/night. A 3rd or 4th person is an additional $10/night each.

The conference web site, www.alaskapeonyconference.com should be up and running in early October where you can make your conference reservations. If you have any questions you can contact me at conference@alaskapeonies.org.
everything at OP. One mistake I made last year was that I would pick for a few hours, then go process everything for an hour or so, then go back to the field. We had very hot weather during harvest last year, so while I was up processing, a lot of flowers blew in the field. Andre said that at OP, if the buds are coming on quickly, they do nothing but harvest and slam them into the chiller. They go in and process when they have time— it’s more important to get as many stems picked as they can. Their processing tables are slanted—which means you don’t have to bend as much. I took pictures and got the dimensions and my handy hubby, Milt, built me one a few days ago!

I also had a fun time with their workers who were mostly of South American heritage. They were playing their Salsa and Merengue music all the time. I love to dance and have watched Dancing with The Stars so I was trying to Salsa dance while processing stems. It made them all laugh. I’m sure they all thought I was a “loco” lady from Alaska! It was a great experience and I would recommend it to everyone. It was also nice to see where most of my “babies” came from!

Now that we are in July the growers in Holland are still prepping weekly shipments to the flower auction from their cold storage facilities. Quality is lower and so the prices are lower as well. I think we have 2-3 more weeks to go, and then it is gone.

Long term storage on peony flowers has a long way to go, for high quality to be put in the market retail place. It is safe to assume that the higher-end retailer would love to get their hands on fresh Alaska Grown peony flowers. The Russians and Asians are more willing to pay a higher price on peonies stems to get them to their country.

So the future is still bright for Alaska Grown peonies, especially knowing that large fresh peony flowers are in demand from July through August. Volume production and shipping logistics are two items that still need to be worked on, to really put Alaska Grown peonies on the market. The Alaska fishing industry has laid the ground work as an example as to where we can go with Alaska Grown Peonies.

There are some videos in APGA’s Dropbox folder on how they do volume harvesting and bunching in the Netherlands. It is the delicate matter of supply and demand, and finding critical mass, not easy for starting out farmers, but if I do not paint the picture, what will you see?

As the Industry Advisor to the APGA Board it is my objective to keep the vision clear and keep you informed as to were things stand. So do not be weary in doing well, rather keep striving forward, work on becoming better at all times.
APGA Board of Directors

President
Government Affairs Liaison
Nominations Committee Chair
Ron Illingworth - North Pole. North Pole Peonies
  ⌛️ lilyvale@awcable.com
  ⌨️ president@alaskapeonies.org
  📞 907-488-0446

Secretary
Kurt Weichhand - Homer. Scenic Place Peonies
  ⌨️ kurt@scenicplacepeonies.com
  ⌨️ secretary@alaskapeonies.org
  📞 907-59399-4090

Vice President
Joni Simpson - Fairbanks. Arctic Sun Peonies
  ⌨️ rvrrun@att.net
  ⌨️ vicepresident@alaskapeonies.org
  📞 907-460-6634

Treasurer
Open
  ⌨️ treasurer@alaskapeonies.org

Ko Klaver - Industry Liaison
  ⌨️ koklaver@me.com
  📞 240-687-7100

Betty Joslyn - Homer. Joslyn Peonies
  ⌨️ bettjoslyn@gmail.com
  📞 907-299-9090

Gary Lincoln - Willow. Giggly Roots Garden
  ⌨️ grg-peonies@gigglerootsgardens.com
  📞 907-854-8333

David Russell - Two Rivers. Boreal Peonies

Contacts

Regional Representatives

HOMER - Melissa Saltzman
  ⌨️ mlsaltzman@yahoo.com
  📞 480-296-5070
  📞 480-231-1855

INTERIOR - Marji Illingworth
  ⌨️ marji@northpolepeonies.com

KENAI - Open

MAT-SU - Sue Lincoln
  ⌨️ cordiprah@gmail.com

Administrator

Gary Wells
1231 Northern Lights Blvd, #500
Anchorage, AK 99503
  📞 907-887-1268
  TID: 26-4430027
  ⌨️ admin@alaskapeonies.org