

'Musings from the Top of the Compost Heap'

Greetings!

16 March 2018, Issue 2

A few musings from the past couple of weeks:

I want to warmly welcome our new Board members:

Carolyn Chapin owner of Polar Peonies (Fairbanks) and current Doctoral candidate focusing on the Marketing and Exporting of Alaskan Peonies. Wes Brightman of Howling Downs Peonies (Two Rivers) an accountant, grower, and packhouse owner. We also want to welcome Pat Holloway, PhD back as our Research Committee Chair. Pat is literally the reason we have an industry in Alaska today.

Sixteen flower growers (six from Alaska!!) and three industry representatives from across the US converged on Washington, DC for the American Grown and California Cut Flower Commission Fly-In Feb 26 thru Feb 28, 2018. The three days were packed with Representative meetings, Agricultural briefings and a Flower Caucus reception. Our activities also included a morning discussing the Annual Floriculture Report at the USDA's National Agricultural Statistics Service headquarters and a discussion on immigration with Tom Mahr, in the Capitol Building, the Political Strategist for Democratic Whip Steny Hoyer (D-MD). On Tuesday evening, a "Wine and Flowers Reception" sponsored by the American Grown Flowers/ Wine Institute was held in the Rayburn House Office Building for the joint Wine and Cut-flower Caucuses of the US House of Representatives. Several hundred people attended the reception including over 50 Congressmen. The Flower Caucus, initiated on our Fly-In only a couple years ago, now boasts of over 40 members and we potentially added as many as 15 more members during our reception. The flower industry is picking up an important voice in American politics!

All of our Alaskan Representatives asked not **why**, but **what** do we need from them to continue our success? All had their staffs immediately working on the actionable requests we made: 1) why the lack of enforcement of labelling laws regarding country of origin for flowers; 2) why does the White House continue to use non-American grown flowers in their events; and, 3) a request for expansion of and increased allocations in specialty crop block grants in the next Farm Bill (2018/2019). An item of particular concern this year is the USDA's sudden suspension of the Annual Floriculture Report (actually dropped in 2016, but without any notification—everyone thought it was just late). This report is absolutely critical as we currently have no measurement of annual domestic floral, greens, or greenhouse production. An additional concern for Alaska, in addition to the cancelled Annual Floriculture report, is that, historically, we have not been included among the 15 states whose data was compiled for the report and Alaska needs to be added.

All of our Representatives are extremely proud of what we have accomplished to date and see us as the first (only?) major agricultural success for Alaska—they like the fishing industry, but are absolutely invested in our success—it is a real source of pride.

We passed the 2018 Budget during our Feb Board meeting and I'd like to emphasize a couple items of importance. First, the major source of funds for APGA continues to be the Annual Conference. I want to acknowledge Gary Lincoln and his team for their leadership in producing a highly successful meeting from both a content and financial perspective. APGA will be producing a conference 'playbook' that will allow continued high-quality conferences and allow us to change and adapt content and workshops as our membership evolves and our needs change. Next year the Board has approved Homer as the 2019 conference location and Beth Van Sandt has already stepped forward and offered her services to help spearhead this effort. Beth will need lots of help from the membership so if you are interested in being involved or have any pertinent in-put please contact Beth [scenicplacepeonies@alaska.net]. In our next 'Musings' I hope to have additional information regarding conferences going forward in the future. Second, Wes Brightman has joined the Board as the new treasurer. It has come to our attention that we haven't had anyone review our books in sometime—there has been absolutely no hint of problems—we just think it prudent that someone with Wes's accounting skills look at our books and report back.

A final musing about peonies...we will in due time have a 'Best Practices Manual for Peonies' [go Pat!!!] but in the meantime some thoughts regarding watering. Throughout the state peony farmers have employed different watering schedules — some growers have no irrigation in their fields; others use water sensors buried in the mounds; still others water only leading up to harvest. As we all consider our strategies, here is my justification/explanation of the significance of early watering. If we are all able to attain plant heights in the 40-inch plus range, harvesting a 22-24-inch stem still leaves plants with several leaves on the remaining 20-ish inch stem—consequently even harvested stems will continue to produce food for the plant. For plants in the mid 30-inch range and shorter, we are forced to harvest nearly the entire stem and have to be very careful not to overcut the plant [potentially leading to a reduction in stem numbers the following year]. Conceptually think of how a plant grows. Unlike our cells, plant cells have a cell wall, a tough cellulose box surrounding the cell. Inside a plant cell is a large central vacuole (think large balloon) that fills with water. The celery in your refrigerator wilts because the large vacuole loses water and the loss of water pressure causes a reduction in the stiffness, hence it wilts—just soak your celery stalk in cold water for a little while and the vacuole refills to tautness and the stiffness of your celery returns. When young plants are growing, they produce lots of new, small cells in the growing tips—if these new, small cells are surrounded by a cardboard box—how do they grow? Bottom line is the 'bungee chords' that hold the different sheets of cellulose together, that make up the cell wall, are broken-- the central vacuole expands with water, as the water pressure increases, the sheets of cellulose slip and expand until the 'adult' cell size is attained; then the 'bungee chords' rebind the cellulose sheets together creating an immovable cell wall. Consequently, if you are not watering early in the year—when the plants are growing rapidly, the cells don't expand as much as they might otherwise and you have shorter plants. Obviously, we'll have lots of soil drainage and plant nutrition conversations in the future, but this is a simple way for many to produce taller, healthy plants.

We are running short on time for the Census...

If you have been sent an Ag Census form, please complete and return or complete on-line at

www.agcounts.usda.gov/cawi

If you do not have your unique farm I.D. number, then request one at

<https://www.agcounts.usda.gov/legacy0/cgi-bin/counts>

We have some fantastic new committees about which I'm excited to reveal soon, further notes will be out shortly. **Please complete the Ag Census.**

I am really excited about our future and look forward to our success.

Cheers

Dave

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