



‘Musings from the Top of the Compost Heap’

Greetings!

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A few musings from the past couple weeks:

It is with great anticipation that we launched 4 new committees during last month’s Board meeting (minutes are on the APGA website).

Here is what we hope our committees are able to accomplish (committees in no particular order):

- 1) **Conference Committee:** Decide on a conference location for the next 5-years --that will allow our conference committees to get the best rates possible going forward and give adequate lead time for optimum conference preparation. Additionally the committee will create a working play-book that will allow us to maintain the quality we all have come to expect and allow us to make adjustments as times and situations evolve. Committee chair Melissa Saltzman [alaskanlegacypeonies@gmail.com]
- 2) **Standards Committee:** Review APGA peony standards document. Develop a series of acceptable options for all aspects of growing/chilling/packaging peonies. Evaluate things like box sizes, cut stem lengths, etc. Committee Chair Wes Brightman [wesbrightman@yahoo.com]
- 3) **Export Committee:** Assemble a document to outline appropriate steps necessary in exporting to major foreign markets. Committee will focus on current markets, but document can be up-dated as additional markets are considered. Additionally, committee will consult with AK Department of Agriculture in formulating appropriate regulatory structure for Alaskan peony industry. Committee Chair Wayne Floyd [ccfarmsslac@acsalaska.net]
- 4) **‘For-Profit’ Committee:** Evaluate the feasibility and usefulness of other organizational formats or subsidiaries of APGA that would allow marketing of peonies. Committee Chair: Betty Joslyn [bettjoslyn@gmail.com]

I have included the name of the committee chair to encourage members with particular skills or knowledge—or who are interested in helping--- to please contact the Chair and join in the process of building a strong and supportive organization for all growers.

In late March I visited a large peony farm in North Carolina—they harvest upwards of 1.3 million (!!) stems in about a 3-week period in June. Future notes will include useful techniques for high-volume harvesting that I learned during my visit. Initially founded in 1943, the farm is now run by third-generation farmers. The scale was eye-popping!! Among the new information for me was: Stems for much of the lower-48 (and world) are not graded by bud size (we use the ‘New Zealand’ method of grading), as we do in Alaska, but by stem length. Flowers are cut to 40, 50, 55, 60, and 70 cm lengths—the longer the stem the better the grade. Few wholesalers are interested in 40cm (16-inch) stems, except for during bad growth years (better than nothing) or high demand varieties/unusual colors. Most wholesalers/distributors are happy with 50 or 55-cm (20-22 inch) stems—some, particularly those catering to designers and for events, require up to 70-cm (28-inch) stems—communication with your client is essential. Many of our growers, particularly those that prepared their soils well prior to planting, are getting harvestable size stems/buds prior to the 3 or 4-year old age class we anticipate producing stems. After investing so much money for so many years, the temptation is to begin harvesting our plants as soon as they start producing marketable stems. We don’t have any farms with 20-plus year old commercial plants, but farms in the lower-48 have plants as old as 100 years. The harsh Alaskan winters, with variable snow depths,



Healthy root with buds emerging from a central crown.

probably limits our ability to maintain plants for a century, but it is an important economic reality that the longer you can maintain “adult” (more than 5-years old) plants the better your production (thus income)—it is expensive both in time and money to replant. The farm in North Carolina has close to a half-million roots and they won’t even consider harvesting young plants until they are at least FIVE years old—even if the plants are strong and the stems are of commercial length earlier.

Here is why, and why it is so critical. When harvesting, the largest (thickest and longest) stems are typically found in the center of the plant—center of the crown. Stem diameter gradually decreases as you move out from the central crown. Most mature peonies, particularly those competing with weeds; plants in suboptimal pH soil; or

with insufficient water or nutrients rarely reach 90 cm (36-inches) tall—some varieties a little more/less. Consequently, if a 55 cm (22-inch) length stem is removed only 35 cm (14 inches) remains with the plant (less if plants are shorter). Cutting longer stems or

cutting on shorter plants leaves even shorter remnants—in some cases stems are cut back to soil level. What the NC growers have found over the last 75 years is that there appears to be insufficient nutrients produced by the remaining leaves on these short stems and the root tissue immediately below begins to die back. Because the longest and thickest stems are frequently present in the central crown, as these stems are harvested over a several year period—the central crown dies back and the new buds are created on edges of a gradually widening cavity in center of the root. Buds, thus stems, that are produced along the margins of the hollow center gradually decrease in size as the cavity widens-- this decrease in stem thickness eventually leads to poor quality commercial stems. They found that heavily harvested plants (even when only half the stems are taken from the plant) become commercially non-viable in 15 to 20 years. Damage appears to be particularly serious/important during their first 5 years, although it is critical that the harvesting of stems on older plants be carefully planned to avoid over-cutting. We don't know yet what the long-term commercial life expectancy of our plants in Alaska is—I'm sure it varies by variety and region, but I think it is essential we understand the potential long-term risk of over-harvesting or harvesting of plants too early in their development.



17-year old root illustrating death of tissue in central crown resulting in buds emerging from the margins of the hollow center.

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