



‘Musings from the Top of the Compost Heap’

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Greetings!

A few musings from the past couple of weeks....

The season is nearly here!! The long months of wondering whether or not all of the 2017 adjustments to fertilizing, watering and general plant care will result in measurable differences in 2018 are about to be answered. The frenetic early season field preparation, weeding (always weeding!!), and marketing all are now coming to fruition. The APGA Board has been similarly busy with new Standards information on the website, a Board meeting with discussions including the availability and efficacy of controlled atmospheric modules, and Board training and strategic planning retreat in Anchorage.

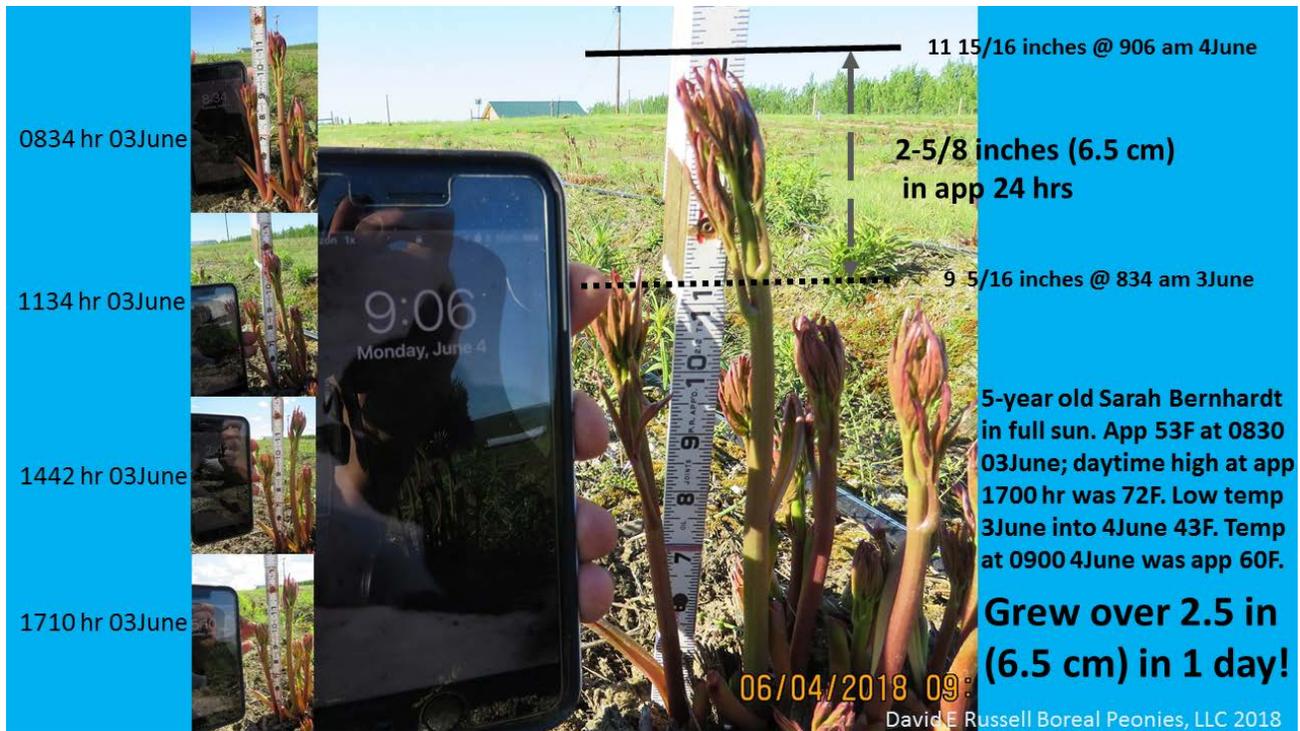
Marketing efforts for our farm in preparation for the 2018 season have re-enforced a number of beliefs I hold regarding the Alaskan Peony industry. The first, we have THE best flowers available in the world—certainly every bit as good as blooms from New Zealand. Second, only Alaskans care where in Alaska we grow our flowers (or live). To the outside world we are just Alaska—many aren’t sure if we are actually part of the US, but to a wholesaler in Miami, FL we are simply Alaskan. This is critical because our competition is not with other growers in Alaska, but with growers elsewhere in the world. The focus of the current APGA Board is to push growers in Alaska to work more as a colonial animal—individual farms, each with its own identity, working in concert to supply the world with quality flowers in a season they need them most. We all have to be able to inter-changeable our stems—all produced with the same quality and attention to detail. As our order sizes increase, it is becoming more critical that we can mix and match; combine multiple farms stems in a single shipment uniformly. APGA has no interest in being a ‘policing’ force within the industry, but at the same time, we are trying to determine the best way to create a trust between growers within the state that will allow cooperation; while limiting the chances of being embarrassed and disappointed by

a fellow grower. To this end the Standards Committee, chaired by Wes Brightman has been hard at work—but we need input.

APGA has focused on identifying current peony standards including USDA, Alaska Grown, and Certified American Grown rather than creating any of its own. To date the only standard APGA has recommended is in box sizes. After hundreds of years of selling flowers, it is amazing how little consensus is present among the various major domestic and foreign companies in box dimensions. Similarly, after many Board discussions, it is apparent that we might have a use for voluntary picking and packing standards. The purpose is not to tell growers how to pick their stems and pack their boxes, but to create a basic APGA standard that can be used for growers who share shipping orders. An Alaskan common standard could simplify the process of different farms filling joint orders. APGA is very interested in feedback on whether they see value in having Alaskan standards, are opposed to it, or any things that they feel should be addressed in it. Please address any comments to Standards Committee c/o Wes Brightman (wesbrightman@yahoo.com).

Similarly, the recent friction between American Grown growers, including Alaskan peony growers and cut flower representatives pushing agendas dominated by imported flowers has done little to further the industry. There will always be a segment of the market interested in exclusively American grown (made) products, however, the American market is far too large for American growers to meet all the needs, hence imported flowers are critical for maintaining and driving the industry. If our expectation is others buy our flowers in the summer—we have to support other growers, whether foreign or domestic, by setting an example and purchasing flowers during the rest of the year. As flower growers it is important we set an example to our friends, neighbors, and co-workers by purchasing flowers for our homes and offices to once again make it the ‘norm’ of having cut flowers prominently displayed. For the price of a Denali burger and fries once a week, we can support other growers, improve the whole industry and do for other growers what we hope they will do for us. I absolutely believe in the American Grown initiative—it is an important marketing mechanism with tremendous customer support and it is important for supporting an industry gutted by good intentions, however, buying American grown at the exclusion of other flower products is not what is going to rebuild the household demand for flowers. Alaskan peony growers can set an important example by purchasing quality flowers, of any origin of your choosing, to begin the long, yet important process of bringing cut flowers back into the American mainstream.

In the research leading up to purchasing our land in Two Rivers and beginning that long road to developing our farm, one of the most difficult ‘facts’ for me to accept was peonies in Alaska can grow 4 cm per day—seemed another Alaskan larger-than-life tale. This past weekend I decided to put it to the test and here is what I found.....



Simply astounding!!

When considering growth rates at this pace, a number of management practices become critical. Be sure plants have adequate water—much of this growth is not mitotic cell division, but in fact cell elongation (see previous ‘Musings’) and water pressure drives the growth. Additionally, plants, just like our teenage kids, require nutrients—to produce commercially relevant stems annually plants have to be fertilized. Over-fertilization can be as bad as no fertilization, so be wise and do your homework before you apply. Fertilizer rates should be in the 1-2 tablespoon per plant range-not cups!! Be wary of applications with significantly higher Nitrogen ratios as the plants might grow too fast and become lanky, thin-stemmed and unstable. Take a little time to look at appropriate fertilizing regimes for your region—we have a lot of tremendous information from Dr. Pat Holloway and others on our website (a huge perk of APGA membership!!!) At Boreal Peonies, we tank mix a foliar feeding every two weeks with our preventative fungal applications. We think this gives our plants a boost in nutrition that might compensate for poorer nutrient up-take due to our lower than optimum soil pH. Good luck and have tremendous success!!!

Cheers

Dave

David E. Russell, PhD
 President, Alaskan Peony Growers Association
 president@alaskapeonies.org

Owner, Boreal Peonies, LLC

dave@borealpeonies.com