



28December2018 Issue 5

## ‘Musings from the Top of the Compost Heap’

### **A few musings from the past couple months.....**

#### **Season’s Greetings!!!**

Sorry for the long delay in communication. I put my head down and jumped into harvest season in July and am only now lifting my head up and realizing it is December! Our 2018 season is nearly completed (only ONE remaining unpaid invoice) and now it is time to prepare for next summer. A lot of exciting things are happening on the Alaskan Peony scene right now!

**First, I hope to see many of you next month at the Annual Conference in Homer—Beth Van Sandt and her team have assembled a fantastic and diverse array of speakers and topics—take the opportunity now to sign-up and join us!!!**

**Second**, our committees continue explore the best avenues for us to follow as we immerse ourselves in the world market—suddenly whether or not our we use horse or steer compost is somewhat muted in the “do we have the capacity to hold, chill, deliver, market, and bill for tens of THOUSANDS of peony stems?!” Plus, how do we get growers to understand that each of us as growers are essential pieces in a very large puzzle? Each piece must fit together seamlessly for the puzzle to be complete.

I had the opportunity to attend both the Floral and the Transportation Committee meetings for the *Produce Marketing Association* in Orlando this fall. This was one of the largest conferences I have attended with about 22,000 attendees from all over the world. I was stuck by two things: one, we are a very, very, small player in a huge arena and we have to work as one because that is how the rest of the world views us; and two, our postharvest handling of flowers needs to be dramatically up-graded; including developing multiple avenues of getting our flowers (with no change in quality or service) out of the state.

**Third**, our farm, Boreal Peonies, tried a harvest method this summer that is used by a farm in North Carolina that cuts 750,000 to 1.3 million peony stems each summer. They harvest into custom designed **totes** that hold 225 to 400 stems depending on size and variety. We averaged about 250 per tote for Sarah Bernhardts and about 350 for Victoire de la Marne. We initially prepared to place harvested stems into 5-gallon buckets, like much of the rest of Alaska, but soon realized that if we had a short harvest season and a long sales season we might have to hold 250,000 stems in a chiller for a couple weeks. Even if we could put 100 stems per bucket we would need to handle, buy, and store about 2,500 buckets that couldn't be stacked when full. Just the handling time was cost prohibitive. So we looked south for answers and experimented with the totes - which had proven to be a useful and efficient option. We experimented with about 200 totes this summer and really liked how well they worked at all stages of harvest and postharvest handling. The biggest drawback is you really don't have an exact count until you bunch and box. My wife is a stickler for detail and telling her that we harvested somewhere between 6000 and 7000 stems in a morning nearly cost me my title as Production Manager! I have included pictures of the totes at various times this summer to give you an idea of how we used them.



Stems harvested into totes—about 250 Sarah Bernhardt or Festiva Maxima fit in each.



Transport from field into waiting refer truck



Can stack five-high in permanent chiller/cooler (four best if totally full).



Best sight in the whole world!!!!

# Meet Your Neighbors

I love insects and I want to begin an informational series introducing both beneficial and pest species found in our fields.



**Bedstraw Hawk-Moth or Galium Sphinx.** This really unusual looking caterpillar has both black and greenish-brown color phases—both colors have large cream-colored ovals along the side. The red “horn” on the tail-end is distinctive. The adult is a large hummingbird-like moth that hovers at flowers and feeds by uncoiling its long proboscis (tongue). This species is found world-wide—North America, Europe, and Asia north to the Arctic Circle. In Alaska, it feeds predominately on fireweed [both *Chamaenerion (Epilobium) angustifolium*-

our ‘standard’ fireweed and Dwarf Fireweed (*Epilobium latifolium*)] although it has a wide-range of other host plants. This caterpillar occurs commonly in our field later in the season—particularly in areas or rows that have a second wave of weeds that we have largely ignored because we’re postharvest. Although they will chew on a peony, because they appear after harvest they are of no consequence. Best control is keep the weeds out of the flower rows (particularly fireweed!).



**Transverse Lady Beetle (*Coccinella transversoguttata*).** This beetle is found across the Northern Hemisphere (including Greenland) and is one of the most common beneficial insects we have present in our flower fields. Can be distinguished from other Lady Beetles (ladybugs) by two white spots on either side of head (on pronotum) and a “transverse” black band near front edge of wing covers (elytra). We find this species most commonly on our buds in June—they feed predominately on aphids

and other small insects, but are probably attracted by the sugary exudate on the buds. **They are beneficial insects and no control measures should be taken!** In future “Neighbors” bios we’ll meet several other Lady Beetle species including two introduced species that might be responsible for Transverse Lady Beetle declines in other areas (New York State considered “Species of Greatest Conservation Need”).