



‘Musings from the Top of the Compost Heap’

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Greetings!

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

Wow do we have a lot going on!! I apologize for my absence during the second half of the year—I get to harvest and the world seems to go three times as fast—I will make a better effort this year!

I have recently returned from a tremendous APGA Conference in Fairbanks. I want to applaud Ron and Marji Illingworth and their team for pulling off a great conference. Despite the many challenges our Interior farmers faced this winter (more on that later), they put together a wide-ranging, educational, inclusive event at the same high standard APGA members have come to count on and expect. **Thank You!!** At the Conference, we installed two new Board members, Michael Flores from Alyeska Farms in Soldotna and Allison Gaylord, Board President of Alaska Beauty Peony Co-op in Homer. Welcome aboard!!! We also have a new Regional Representative from the Interior, Leslie Conner of Periwinkle Peonies—I want to welcome Leslie onboard!!! I also want to thank Marji Illingworth for her many years of service —probably since the actual beginning of APGA - as our outgoing Interior representative. **Thank You!!!**

Another well-deserved recognition from this year’s Conference, was to the 2020 **Growers Cup winner, Bob Van Veldhuizen**, for his tireless work on trying to get us to understand our soils- what we have; what we need, and how we can sustainably improve them. Bob’s help and advice have been extremely important in the statewide development of our farms.

I am going to propose a series of changes, adjustments, and additions to APGA going forward. These are **MY opinions only** at this point, but with your input we will either adopt or modify them with votes in the up-coming Board meetings. **I envision our regional representatives as the true drivers within APGA.** I have asked our regional reps to reach out to all farms in their area. To facilitate this, a list of member farms will be regenerated and sent to each rep from Gary Wells. After completing some of our on-going items from the end of last year, I hope the

agenda for up-coming meetings will be driven by the needs and concerns put forth by the regional reps, rather than an agenda that is directed by the president.

The most immediate items that I want to handle, by no later than March's Board meeting, (we can discuss at this month's meeting) are:

- Table the discussion of becoming a for-profit Organization for at least the next two years, and here's why. First off, we don't have the money to initiate it, secondly, most growers that have approached me aren't interested in the change, and thirdly, our current 501C3 status might allow some money-making opportunities without having to change our charter.
- Not merge with the Alaska Peony Society—we are trying to overcome the perception we are hobby growers.
- I think we should have the annual conference full-time in Anchorage—good facilities more centrally located and less regional tribalism. The 2021 conference is already scheduled for Anchorage—we also need to immediately get a Conference committee in place.
- I would also like to proceed forward with a name change from APGA to simply the Alaskan Peony Association. All coops, pack houses, brokers, etc. are now naturally part of our family and a committee will determine the best rates and how to incorporate them physically into our community.

What I want to accomplish in the next year or two is that our organization **has to be focused on quality**—all the how's, when's, what's, and how much's, mean nothing unless we produce the best quality product consistently across the state. I received a lot of push back from members associated with my proposal last fall on how to ensure uniform quality. The gist of the problem is no one wanted to police another farm and no one wanted to be policed. A renewed push for consistent quality needs a base on which to build from. With help and guidance from Pat Holloway, our Research Committee chair, we will produce an Alaskan Peony Production Manual for APGA members. Over the last couple of conferences, it has become apparent that so much new (and exciting) information has been developed from results of our Specialty Crop Block and TASC grants that it has exceeded our ability to communicate it to our membership. I came home last week overwhelmed with climate change considerations; post-harvest fungal info to process, thrips biology to digest, post-harvest atmospheric controlled chambers, and a new view of our position and timing within the world flower community—just to scratch the surface of all of the new info to incorporate and respond to.

Over the next year I will endeavor to secure a paragraph or two, from the different researchers, on what we on the farm should know and include them in my Musings. Additionally, Pat and I, with input from many others, will attempt to translate current research into actionable on-farm practices to include in our Manual. The most difficult step in developing any project is the first one... it is much easier to add to or modify something already written. Consequently, I have attached to this Musing our farm's, Boreal Peonies, Procedures Manual as the template around which we can build a manual. This is **NOT** to be considered guidelines on how to run your farm—it is what we do 25-miles east of Fairbanks and may not be appropriate or accurate for your farm. I think it will serve as a platform to allow additions, discussions and ultimately the production of a more comprehensive, up-to-date Manual for the state. It also does not include post-harvest/marketing and my hope is a packhouse with similar written procedures will allow us

to use their manual as a template to build on. I also want our manual to include contact info for peony-friendly vendors that will make all our lives more efficient.

As part of our renewed education push—I would like to begin the process of producing 5-minute (plus/minus) educational videos on all aspect of our industry, again, these would be made available on-line to our members.

On a different topic. I think the recent dissolution of the largest Peony coop in the state is a cautionary tale for all. For those unaware, Arctic Alaska Peonies (AAP), an interior-based coop disbanded at the end of 2019. I know many stories have circulated around the causes, but let me give my two-cents worth and concerns state-wide. My opinion on why AAP was ultimately unsuccessful is two-fold—very poor communication within the membership, such as assuming everybody understood what was happening, sometimes without it being discussed (or folks not really hearing everything), and secondly, and equally important, uneven quality that led to major clients reducing or dropping orders. This combination created a feed-back loop that they ultimately couldn't overcome. I see this as a cautionary tale for our entire industry—the lens through which we view and evaluate actions by others can be completely misread if we 'expect' maleficence or duplicity. This creates silos of beliefs that leads to many of the regional tribalistic behaviors that have subtly reverberated within our peony community. One of the reasons for my desire to permanently move the annual conference to Anchorage is to reduce the tribalism. Additionally, we are about to truly burst into the international market—our farms are getting larger, our reach longer; we have work in concert with each other and we can't really do that unless we trust each other's product and we can communicate honestly. To trust each other's product, we have to follow a common standard and to communicate honestly, we have to be direct, but civil, and ask if we don't know—not just assume.

I am very excited about 2020!! As I mentioned earlier, we'll have more flowers, will reach more markets and will continue to lead the world in spectacular flower production. Your ideas are critical to driving the discussion in APGA—please work with our Regional Reps to make sure you're heard, and you are always welcome to sit in on our Board Meetings and share your thoughts directly.

Good luck and have tremendous success!!!

Cheers

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