



The soaring popularity of peonies is getting a boost from the newest producer: Alaska.

It's no secret that peonies have exploded in popularity over the past decade and more, especially for weddings. It's also no surprise. The classic peony palette of white, pink, blush, and deep red is of course perfect for weddings. With long, sturdy stems and large, frilly blooms, peonies combine dramatic impact from a distance with a soft, romantic look.

It wasn't long ago, however, that peonies could be difficult to obtain unless the wedding happened to fall within a rather narrow window of availability. At any given peony farm, the harvest season lasts no longer than a few weeks at most. Within the mainland United States, it begins in the South, in March

or April, and moves northward, fizzling out in June or at the latest early July.

The season is so limited in part because peonies thrive better out of doors and resist forcing in greenhouses. In this they are unlike roses and many other premium flowers. Part of their charm, indeed, is the allure of the field-grown flower—wind-blown, rain-fresh and kissed by the sun.

Like roses, however, peonies prefer well-drained soil, plenty of sunlight, and a cool climate. The moment the thermometer hits 90 degrees, peonies begin to blow open so quickly that it's difficult for a grower to catch them at the right moment for harvest. Cooler weather also means a slower-growing peony, which can result in longer stems and bigger flowers.

OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS To expand the North American peony season from its original window of April through June, importers turned first to the Southern Hemisphere: to Chile, which produces peonies in October and November, and to New Zealand, which sends

peonies northward in November and December. Some Israeli peonies are also available from January through April, although these tend to be more expensive and somewhat smaller than others.

That left one period, from July through September, when peonies simply could not be had—until the early 2000s, when a brilliant botanist at the University of Fairbanks in Alaska, Patricia Holloway, figured out that this was precisely the time when peonies would bloom beautifully in Alaska.

Sensing an opportunity for the state's economy, in 2006 Holloway convinced a friend with a retail garden center, Rita Jo Shultz, to start Alaska's first peony farm, Alaska Perfect Peony, with just 3,500 plants. (She now has more than 15,000.) In the same year, Rita Jo made a number of presentations to legislators in Juneau as part of a campaign to win support for a new indus-

Dr. Alexander Fleming is just one of many peony varieties grown in Alaska. Photo courtesy of Alaska Perfect Peony.

fresh focus peonies

try. In 2008, she and four other Alaska peony growers toured peony farms in New Zealand, gathering expertise and inspiration. Founding members of the Alaska Peony Growers Association, these pioneers started a snowball rolling that has been gathering size and momentum ever since.

THE NEXT FRONTIER With a climate not unlike Chile's, Alaska turns out to be a growing region that not only stretches the peony season but also ups the ante in terms of peony size and quality. Bugs and diseases that afflict peonies in other climates can't survive the extremely cold Alaskan winters—and so far, other native pests have not developed a taste for the flowers: "Moose don't eat them, deer don't eat them, bear don't eat them," says Rita Jo.

On the flip side, Alaska summers bring the midnight sun for a period of about a hundred days—and during this time the combination of cool temperatures and abundant sunlight produces peonies that range up to twice the size of peonies grown elsewhere.

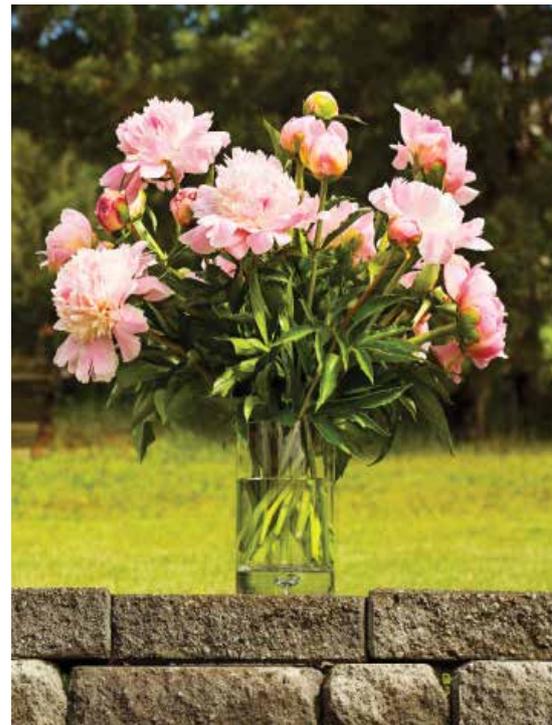
"Nine inches across is not uncommon," boasts grower Carolyn Chapin of Polar Peonies, one of the farms flourishing in the Alaskan interior. "I had a customer who wanted a dozen peonies for his daughter's bouquet. I asked, 'Is she six feet tall?' Because the flowers are so big, you really need only three or four of them for a good-sized bouquet."

Alaskan peonies do tend to be more expensive than others. Nonetheless, since Alaskans started growing peonies for export in 2006, supply has not kept up with demand. "Because the quantity is limited, we start contacting past clients and taking pre-orders around the first of March," says Carolyn. Production is still expanding, but only just so fast: it takes three to five years for a new peony bush to produce harvestable blooms.

The new Alaskan industry has had considerable help—from the state, and also from expert peony growers in the lower 48 and around the world. "They don't mind helping us, because we're not competing with them, we're complementing their availability," Carolyn points out. "And 12-month availability



OUT ON THE FARM Alaska peony farms range in size, but many are small family farms of half an acre or less, maintained by husband-and-wife teams with help from the kids during the summer. Photos on this and the following pages (except as noted) by Elizabeth Beks of North Pole Peonies.



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It takes up to five years for the roots of a peony bush to become big and strong enough to produce a commercial harvest. Each spring, the old stems and leaves are cut back; new shoots—set the previous year—emerge and grow fast in Alaska's long summer days. The carefully selected buds are sorted (above) and placed immediately in the cooler (below).



helps the peony market as a whole. It's easier for florists to promote peonies year-round and know they'll be able to get them."

ALL IN THE FAMILY Today Alaska has about 50 peony farms, mostly family-owned. "I expect we'll have about 50 more in the next couple of years," says Rita Jo. Ranging in size, but mostly quite small, the farms are spread out over quite a large area.

It includes three primary growing regions: One is the interior part of the state, around Fairbanks, just below the Arctic circle. It may be counterintuitive, but this northernmost region is where the Alaska season starts in July: "In the summer, we get the most daylight, so our flowers grow faster," Carolyn explains. (Her farm, appropriately named Polar Peonies, is a founding member of the Arctic Alaska Peonies growers' cooperative.)

Two other growing areas lie farther south: one just north of Anchorage, another on the Kenai Peninsula that juts from Alaska's southern coast. These regions send peonies to florists in the lower 48 from August through late September and even early October.

How do all these widely dispersed farms—many of them worked by just a husband-and-wife team or a small family—acquire the expertise they need, and the logistics to get the product to market? Alaskans have found a range of solutions in growers' co-ops, the state growers' association (which sponsors a website that is a portal for inquiring buyers as well as a resource for members), and a new commercial distribution company.

These same institutions, of course, make it possible for buyers to find and get what they need, while promoting and sustaining a proliferation of small family farms.

TOGETHER WE GROW Growers' co-operatives have operated in Holland for centuries. One has only to know the history of the Dutch flower industry—famously efficient, innovative and competitive—to know that they can serve their members and customers well.

One such is Arctic Alaska Peonies, which allows growers in the interior region to consolidate orders and share resources. Within

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the co-op, any one farmer might not have a sufficient quantity of peonies that are ready for harvest at any given time to meet demand. The temptation might be to cut peonies at the right time (crucial for quality) and hold them in the cooler until you have enough. Peonies hold up relatively well in storage—"but we want to ship it fresh, not store it until someone wants it," says Carolyn. "With 40 farmers in the co-op who have flowers ready to harvest at different times, it's easier to do that and still meet the needs of customers.

"We also do education for our members," Carolyn continues. "I don't want one of our members bringing flowers to the packing house and I have to tell them, sorry, this is not the right quality. We teach them about soil nutrients, proper spacing, and botrytis prevention (even though we don't have too much of it up here). They're going to be learning how to do the harvest on older fields with a more experienced grower."

For example, she tells, an expert peony grower knows to take only the best half of what the plant has to offer, leaving the rest for the plant to flourish. "That way you shouldn't be harvesting anything less than a grade A

FOR VARIETIES' SAKE Most growers who produce peonies for the U.S. cut-flower market concentrate on fluffy double varieties—and Alaskan peony growers are no exception. Occasionally, though, you may see a single or semidouble variety on offer, with an inner crown of stamens that remains distinct from the outer row of petals. One example is *Bowl of Beauty*, directly above; as the flower matures, the petals turn a darker pink, contrasting with the stamens' lemon yellow. Most peonies come in shades ranging from white to deep red—like, on this page, pale pink *My Love* (top middle), cherry red *Felix Crouse* (top right), or the bright fuchsia flowers of *Shawnee Chief* (lower left, above) and *Kansas* (making friends with a bee).

bud. You leave behind the crooked, cracked, misshapen, small." The educational effort is important to build the Arctic Alaska Peony cooperative as a brand that represents a consistent level of quality.

For peony growers across the state, the Alaska Peony Growers Association likewise supports educational opportunities and a joint

market effort with the association's website, www.alaskapeonies.org, where buyers can learn about different varieties, check availability, and link through to individual farms.

Relatively new on the scene is a wholesale commercial peony pack house, Alaska Peony Distributors, that provides services to farmers including, often, flying out to a far-flung farm in a twin-engine plane to collect the harvest, then selling and transporting the stems to markets on the mainland.

FLORIST FRIENDLY Buyers of Alaska peonies, likewise, range from large to small. "Some growers do ship direct to brides," Carolyn says. "I always say to brides, 'Who is your florist?' Because you really need a florist to handle them correctly when they arrive, so they're perfect for that day."

Florists have become more sophisticated as buyers over just the past three or four years, Carolyn notes: "They used to ask for either Sarah Bernhardt or for reds, whites, or other pinks. Now they're asking by name for varieties like *Festiva Maxima*," the beautiful white peony with usually two or three red flecks, or the fragrant, ivory-white *Duchess*



de Nemours. "When they know enough to ask for a variety name, they're more likely to be get exactly the color they want," she points out. "There are 50 shades of red!" Photos of peony varieties are featured on the websites of Arctic Alaska Peonies and the Alaska Peony Growers Association, among others.

Carolyn advises florists to take shipment of peonies at least three days prior to a wedding—not only to give them time to open up, but also because, in the unlikely event of damage in shipping, that leaves enough time for re-delivery. "We've only had to do that twice in the last six years," she says. "We ship them in quilt batting, and we do ship them insured, because we want to make our florists look good." Also, she points out, peonies have sufficient shelf life in the cooler



Peach and yellow peonies, like the two Itoh hybrids seen above left and on the previous page, are less common and, for cut-flower growers, more experimental. As field-grown flowers, peonies may exhibit a wide range of shading, even when the blooms are fully mature—as seen in the bouquet of Sarah Bernhardt peonies above, with blossoms that vary from pale to bright pink. All these photos of Alaska-grown varieties are from Elizabeth Beks at North Pole Peonies, except the bouquet of pure white Henry Sass peonies at left, from Alaska Perfect Peony.

that you can afford to get them in a little early and work with them prior to the wedding day.

A BRIGHT FUTURE It's an exciting time for Alaska peony farmers. This winter's Alaska Peony Growers Conference, with more than 175 people attending, offered a pre-conference growers' school. "It sold out, so they doubled the registration and added a post-school," reports Rita Jo. Representing a Dutch company that sells peony roots to beginning farmers, Rita Jo gets to see and chat with a lot of these new growers. "I especially loved talking to a mom and her son who is probably 10 or 11 years old," she tells. "It was rewarding to me to see this young man getting enthusiastic and involved with decisions about varieties and how to lay out the

fields. The purpose of the venture is to finance this young man's college education. I'm a grandma and a great-grandma myself, so for me, it doesn't get much better than that."

Chances are good that by the time that young man is in college, Alaskan peony growers will still be thriving, better established than ever—and that even with the rapid growth of their industry, demand for Alaska's extra-large and beautiful flowers from July through September, prime wedding months, will continue to outstrip supply. 🌸

For more information:

www.alaskapeonies.org

www.alaskapeonymarketinggroup.com

www.arcticalaskapeonies.com

www.echolakefarm.com

FROM BUD TO BLOSSOM

The exact stage when peonies should be harvested differs from one variety to another—but in general, it's best to purchase peonies in the bud stage, with buds slightly soft and showing the true flower color. Green, hard buds may not mature properly, while fully opened flowers will have a reduced vase life.

To encourage peonies to open faster, mist the buds heavily and place them in bright light (not direct sunlight). The bright light enhances blossom coloring and expedites flower development. Some florists also lightly cover their peony buds with a clear light plastic, to increase humidity and hasten flower maturity. Conversely, to slow flower development, place processed buds or flowers in a dark corner of the cooler.

