

Blooming Ambition

Growers, Researchers Perfect Peonies in America's Last Frontier

by KELLY HATTON

Rita Jo Shoultz is something of a modern-day pioneer. An Indiana-born Alaska transplant and commercial nursery owner, Shoultz, nearing retirement age, decided to try a new crop on her land outside of Homer, Alaska. In the nine years since planting that first experimental field, she's quadrupled her production, established a viable marketing model for her crop, helped train new farmers and even traveled to Singapore and the White House to promote Alaska's newest export — peonies.

Alaska is one of the few places where peonies bloom in June and July, perfectly timed for wedding season in the lower 48 states. Alaska's long, cool summer days produce some of the biggest and brightest blooms. The number of commercial peony farms in the state grew from zero in 2004 to 70 in 2014. Shoultz's farm, Alaska Perfect Peony, was one of the first. Now run by Shoultz, her husband and her son, she is in it for the long haul.

"I plan on doing it until I can't do it anymore," she said.

The industry's early success is attributed to just-right market and growing conditions: a unique bloom time and the right climate. But behind these favorable conditions is a network of committed scientists, extension agents and growers. The exchange of information between and among these groups helped to establish, and continues to improve, Alaska's peony farms. The confluence of farmers who are eager to learn, scientists willing to work with farmers and both groups' enthusiasm to share information is the industry's foundation.



Owner Rita Jo Shoultz explains when buds are ready to be cut at Alaska Perfect Peony.

PHOTOS BY KELLY HATTON

ALASKA PERFECT PEONY

Shoultz embodies the experimental spirit of Frontier State farmers. At the urging of Dr. Pat Holloway, professor and researcher at University of Alaska, Fairbanks (UAF), Shoultz decided to give peonies a try.

"I said, why not? I put 3,500 peonies out, thinking I'd just experiment with them," she said.

Even with her years of experience raising and selling perennials, her beginning as a peony farmer was not without trial. The techniques of soil preparation, selection of varieties, timing of harvest and how to sell the flowers were all unknowns when Shoultz got her start.

"I don't know of any mistake we didn't make in that first field," she said. The testing period was slow. It takes between three and five years for peony plants to produce flowers large enough to sell on the export market. But Shoultz was patient. She kept meticulous notes about what worked and what didn't. Eventually, she would abandon 25 percent of that first field. Over the years, she's dug up old plants, replacing them with varieties better suited for her soil and that hold up in shipping.

The years of trial and error have paid off. Shoultz has added two ad-



ditional peony fields and has a total of 15,000 bulbs in the ground with enchanting names such as 'Bowl of Cream,' 'Red Charm,' 'Moon River,' 'Eden's Temptation' and 'Coral Sunset.' In early July, the rows of slender green bushes are topped with large, waxy buds in all shades of pink and white. The buds will not bloom until they've been cut, packed and shipped to the lower 48. Twice a day, pickers test bulbs by giving the sepals a gentle squeeze and looking for "true color" across the outer petals. In the packhouse, two women bundle cut stems for orders. The flowers are then stored in a cold room, kept between 33°F and 34°F to prevent the buds from opening. Twice a week, a refrigerated FedEx truck pulls into Shoultz's driveway and loads shipments. In nine years, Shoultz has developed systems and the infrastructure necessary to run a successful commercial peony business.

UNIVERSITY COOPERATION

Dr. Pat Holloway, the UAF researcher who encouraged Shoultz to try peonies, is credited with the "discovery" of Alaska peonies, though Holloway herself calls it "sheer accident." In the 1990s, at one of the many conferences she attended, Holloway learned during a casual conversation with a flower grower from Oregon that Alaska's bloom season for peonies is unique and could po-

tentially fill a niche in the flower market.

Alaska is not a state known for commercial agriculture, though the long summer days produce impressive crops. Vegetable growers across the state sell products at local farmers' markets and through community supported agriculture (CSA) programs, but those markets are limited.

"There are only so many tomatoes you can sell," said Holloway. "It's hard to expand." Because of the state's small population, "export markets are the logical choice."

At UAF, Holloway's research focused on Alaska-native plants, but as a university scientist, she has an ears-to-the-ground attitude. She's interested in doing work that will be relevant to farmers and is willing to take risks.

"I have done lots of research projects over the years – a lot of them have failed. That's what research is, 'no, this doesn't work' is just as valuable as 'yes, this does,'" she said. The important thing is to try.

The conversation that could have been nothing more than conference banter led to Holloway writing grants and planting a test plot of peonies in UAF's Georgeson Botanical Garden, part of the university's Agricultural & Forestry Experiment Station. Through this research, Holloway established the basics for Alaskan peony production: which varieties grow well, the importance of good soil drainage and



Blooms after a shower at Stone Circle Peonies.

the need for generous snow cover (or, failing that, mulch) during the winter months.

When Holloway's test field yielded positive results, she began to encourage growers to give the crop a try. She spoke about her experiences at conferences, and UAF's cooperative extension staff hosted workshops.

"Communicating with people around the state is difficult, but the cooperative extension has a great network," said Holloway. This network was vital in getting the industry off the ground and continues to provide important support as more farmers plant peonies and new challenges emerge.

"We have a great system in the United States between experiment stations and extension agents," said Holloway. "The biggest thing is you have to sit down and have one-on-one time with growers. You show support and provide a baseline of information. You lose one-on-one contact; you lose the link that is critical to the exchange of ideas. Some of the most creative and innovative people in the world are farmers. Scientists need to take the time to get out there and see what they're doing."

Now, Holloway said, peony farmers come to her with questions they



Cut stems ready to be moved into cold storage at Alaska Perfect Peony.

want answered. It's an example of how university research and extension should work — in cooperation with growers.

"If there's something I don't know, I can develop a network of people around the nation and around the world," said Holloway. "It's a matter of having that stream of information and encouragement for farmers."

Recently, UAF reached out to researchers at Washington State University's plant pathology program to help Alaska growers manage a common peony plague, Botrytis, a fungus that can affect peony shoots and buds and cause flower blight. Researchers are identifying the types of Botrytis found in Alaska to better understand the life cycle of the pathogen and to identify the best preventative strategies for growers.

ALASKA PEONY GROWERS ASSOCIATION

In 2005, a group of growers including Shoultz came together to form the Alaska Peony Growers Association. It's the first grower-formed, grower-run association in the state. The group's goal is "to promote and support all aspects of the peony industry in Alaska." The means of achieving this goal is collaboration. "We seek to unite and encourage our members through the cooperative exchange of

ideas, information and technical assistance," reads their mission statement. The organization holds an annual conference and conducts an annual survey to track the industry's growth.

"They've done a great job getting the word out," Holloway said of the association. "Their conference is the



Buds almost ready for harvest at Alaska Perfect Peony.

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best I've been to. They really search for people to answer the questions they have."

The conference is also an opportunity to forge a network in a state that's more than twice the size of Texas. There are currently peony growers in all of Alaska's lower regions. Relationships formed at conferences can lead to informal exchanges that happen year-round.

In the Kenai Peninsula, where Shoultz farms, the peony network is strong and continues to grow.

"Some of us work together, not necessarily as a co-op, but we'll sit down over a cup of coffee and ask, 'how did that go for you?'" explained Shoultz. For her, advising new growers is an important part of the day-to-day work.

"Because I've been around the longest and I helped start the association, I get a lot of questions. I really do want to make sure that I give good advice because I don't want them to have to do what I did," she said.

Shoultz advises potential growers to be realistic.

"I tell people who are just starting out that they shouldn't plan on making money for the first five years and to make sure they've got the stamina."

She also stresses the importance of soil testing and amending and starting small.

FLOWERS TO MARKET

In 2014, Alaskan peony growers sold nearly 60,000 stems. Holloway predicts that the industry will achieve 1 million stems within the next five years. Though the number pales in comparison with Holland's millions, for Alaska it means that the industry has plenty of room to grow.

One of the continuing challenges for growers is finding the best way to market their peonies. Growers can get between \$3 and \$7 per stem, depending on the market – local farmers' markets, flower wholesalers, florists



Varieties with delicate coloration are grown inside a hoop house at Alaska Perfect Peony.

or directly to brides. Shoultz, for example, sells a large percentage of her peonies to a consortium of high-end bridal florists on the East Coast, but she also works directly with brides and sells blooms not quite up to standard for shipping at the farmers' market. Because she has the infrastructure and market relationships, she also acts as a local buyer for other growers in her region.

Other groups around the state are forming partnerships to market peonies. Several models of co-operatives have emerged. In some cases, member

farms share packhouses to keep individual infrastructure costs low. In others, the cooperative markets flowers on behalf of member farmers to meet the demands of larger orders.

"There are a lot of different ways people are trying out. Some of them will work, some of them won't. We'll see," said Holloway. After 30 years of horticulture research, she is comfortable with ambiguity. It means there is still work to be done and opportunities to improve.

Kelly Hatton is a writer and editor based in Rochester, New York.

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