

ALASKA *peony pride*

With the perfect climate for late-summer growing, Alaska's peony industry continues to flourish.

BY MATT KELLY

For nearly a decade, peonies have been available for brides during the late-summer wedding season, thanks to the Alaska peony industry.

Located in a uniquely ideal climate, Alaska flower farms harvest the bold, fragrant flowers from June through September, when many florists need them most. Throughout most of that time period each year, Alaska growers are the only commercial peony producers harvesting in the world.

Since its beginning, the Alaska peony industry has grown rapidly as wholesalers and floral retailers spread the word to colleagues and customers about the unparalleled quality and unique availability of peony varieties from the northernmost state.

late-summer market

Resistant to greenhouse conditions, peonies prefer to be field grown, limiting their growing season. Not only have Alaska growers expanded the availability of these beloved flowers, dominating the market during their harvest every year, they are also able to offer bigger and more beautiful peonies than most other growing regions around the world. The climate in Alaska is one of the most conducive to peony growth in the world, and many of the pests that often harm crops are unable to survive Alaska winters.

Other Northern Hemisphere growers offer peonies in spring and early summer — approximately April through June. Southern Hemisphere growers, such as those in New Zealand, Australia and Chile, harvest in November and December.

early start

Last year, Alaska's summer peony season came a bit early for some Alaska growers, and the peony harvest began in mid-June in areas where it normally begins later in the summer. Since growers in other states already offer peonies during this time of year, the early start may have affected some farms negatively, according to **Betty Joslyn**, owner of **Joslyn Peonies** in Homer.

"The peonies came early last year," Betty explains. "And that's at the tail end of the Lower 48 where they kind of overlap, so that may have led some potential customers to order from growers in the Lower 48 because they're easier to get, and they don't have as much shipping cost. We prefer to be the only ones offering peonies during our growing season."

(top) A gathering of lovely pink and dark-pink flowers includes some of the roughly 82 Alaska-grown peony varieties. According to the most recent findings from the Alaska Peony Growers Association, in 2014, there were 168,961 peony roots in the ground, but the total number of roots continues to increase significantly each year. *Photo: Elizabeth Beks.*



1. A variety in the most popular color, white 'Immaculee' peonies from Giggly Roots Gardens in Willow offer the purely refined elegance brides seek in droves in the late summer months each year.
2. Usually shipped in a tight bud stage, Alaska peonies, like these from Scenic Place Peonies in Homer, can be manipulated by florists to reach any desired stage of development during their intended display time — from bud stage to fully open.
3. Posing as a flower girl, Danielle Beks carries a gorgeous handful of peonies from the Arctic Alaska Peonies cooperative. *Photo: Elizabeth Beks.*
4. Stunning white 'Festiva Maxima' peonies from Echo Lake Peonies in Soldotna offer large loosely formed blooms with pink streaks.
5. The cup-shaped blooms of 'Coral Charm' peonies from Giggly Roots Gardens are a deep coral upon opening that will fade to a softer color as the flowers age.
6. Giggly Roots Gardens' 'Buckeye Belle' peonies feature deep red blooms with golden stamens.
7. With large soft-pink blooms and lighter pink on the edges of their petals, 'Sarah Bernhard' peonies from Arctic Alaska Peonies, along with other Alaskan varieties, can reach 9 inches in diameter. *Photo: Elizabeth Beks.*

growing seasons

The Homer growing region's season usually begins the latest in the year since it's at the highest altitude. The higher the elevation of a farm, the more snow it gets, which prevents the crops from emerging as quickly.

Different growing conditions exist in each of Alaska's four growing regions. The Interior region's growing season starts the earliest each year, and from there, the farther south the regions are, the later their seasons start. Matanuska-Susitna (Mat-Su) Valley's season begins after the Interior region's, then the Central Kenai Peninsula, followed by the Homer region.

According to **Ron Illingworth**, co-founder of **North Pole Peonies** in North Pole, peonies usually start growing around May or early June in the Interior region.

"By late June, they are ready to harvest," Ron says. "In one 24-hour period, you may see 5 to 6 inches of growth. Once they get close to bloom time, they can go from a tight bud to fully open in less than a day. Growers have to walk the fields every few hours during harvesting season so they can cut the stems at just the right time to ensure that the buds will open perfectly when sold."

flower shipments

Florists can purchase Alaska peonies directly from growers or through wholesalers. Growers ship flowers overnight to anywhere in the Lower 48 in shipments of all sizes, ranging from small boxes of 20 stems to 2,000-stem shipments to wholesalers.

Many Alaska growers have negotiated discount shipping rates through FedEx, which helps them keep costs down for their customers.

Beth Van Sandt, owner of **Scenic Place Peonies** in Homer, shared the following box sizes and stem capacities (which range depending on the flower varieties):

- Bridal — 20 to 30 stems
- Small — 30 to 50 stems
- Medium — 50 to 100 stems
- Large — more than 100 stems

The cost of an overnight shipment ranges from \$50 to \$120 per box, depending on size and weight.

"The most expensive box I ever shipped was \$127," Beth says. "It weighed about 30 pounds and held about 250 stems."



The booming Alaska peony industry increasingly yields thousands of beautiful blooms each year, such as these from Glacier Peonies in Homer. From all four growing regions combined, the total number of stems harvested in 2014 was 75,264, which was more than double the harvested stems in 2013, according to the Alaska Peony Growers Association. The number of stems harvested has likely increased significantly since then, as the number of viable crops continues to grow each year. *Photo: Shelley Rainwater*

ordering and processing

Alaska peonies are in such high demand, growers tend to sell out quickly each year, according to **Richard Repper**, president of the **Alaska Peony Growers Association** and owner of **Echo Lake Peonies** in Soldotna, on the Central Kenai Peninsula.

“Availability is the keyword for florists and brides to consider,” Richard says. “If the ‘date is set’ and it is in the window of availability for Alaska peonies, those individuals would be most prudent to order flowers in January or February to seal the deal with growers.”

Since peonies are shipped in bud stage, if you are planning to include peonies in a wedding, you should schedule your shipment of peonies to arrive at least three days prior to the event to leave enough time for them to open.



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Marjorie Illingworth, co-owner of North Pole Peonies, prepares stems at the North Pole Peonies Packhouse — one of Arctic Alaska Peonies' two packhouses — to be collected, chilled and shipped to customers. *Photo: Elizabeth Beks.*

"Florists often begin making centerpieces a day or two before the wedding, but peonies need that time to adjust and open," Betty Joslyn shares. "Keep them cool until you're ready to use them."

Rita Jo Shoultz, owner of **Alaska Perfect Peony** in Fritz Creek, recommends cutting off 2 to 4 inches of each stem and rehydrating the flowers by placing them in a clean bucket of flower-food solution.

"We ship peonies in a tight bud stage unless customers specifically ask for a different stage," Rita Jo says. "This allows the end users to keep the flowers in the cooler for tighter bud use or leave in a warmer area to allow the buds to fully open. The end users can manipulate how they want the buds to open to fit their particular needs."

varieties and colors

There are about 82 varieties of peonies grown in Alaska — roughly 21 white, 10 blush, 10 light pink, 12 pink, six dark pink, 15 red, four coral and four bicolor.

"Our main crop is about 50 percent white." Beth Van Sandt says. "About 20 percent of our crop is blush, 20 percent pink and 10 percent red. The majority of my flowers are white because those are the best-sellers."

In coming years, even more peony varieties will become available in Alaska. The crops that will yield the additional varieties are several years old already, but it takes three or four years for peony crops to reach their full production potential, according to Betty Joslyn.

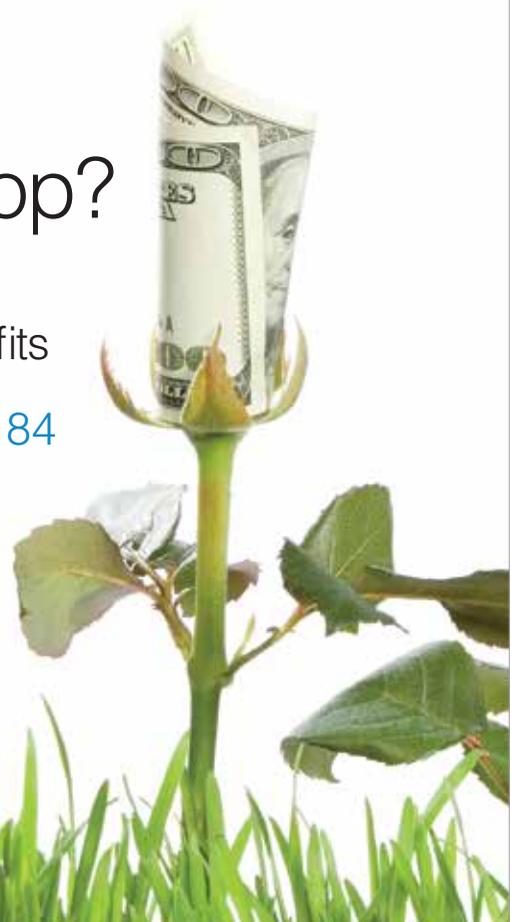
"You have to pinch off the buds to get the roots to grow," Betty says. "Over time, the crops just get better and better. The plants grow more stems, produce more buds and become more beautiful with age."

Growers sell peonies for approximately \$3.75 to \$7 per stem because it takes several years for peony plants to become viable. Roots cost between \$12 and \$150 each, depending on the variety, according to **Modern Farmer** magazine.

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newest region

"Matanuska-Susitna Valley [Mat-Su] is the newest region to become involved in growing peonies," Richard Repper shares. "It is named for the two river valleys of the Matanuska River and the Susitna River that traverse the area and drain from the Talkeetna and Chugach Mountains.

"We have many established farms and more developing farms every year in Matanuska-Susitna Valley. The region consists of very diverse microclimates, so harvest timing, as well as growing conditions, can be diverse. These attributes ensure our product is consistently available throughout the season.

"Our farmers take great pride in developing their fields and are proud to provide the best quality Alaska cut peonies."

quality product and services

Alaska peony growers have always been aware that demand for their product exceeds the amount of flowers they can produce, and they keep it that way by offering only the highest grade of product. For the most part, growers work together to collectively ensure that they meet the level of product quality customers expect.

Growers also work together when they are unable to fill orders. If one farm sells out of a particular peony variety for the season, and customers call asking for it, growers are happy to refer them to farms that can meet their needs. Growers do this to ensure the continued success and good reputation of their industry as well as their individual farms.

evolving designs

Beth Van Sandt says she cuts her peonies at different stages of development for textural contrast. She offers buds, half-open and full-bloom peonies as ways for florists to add depth to their designs.

Because they have such a long vase life, Beth says florists can pair buds and full-bloom peonies with other flowers, so that when the other flowers start to fade, customers can remove them, and as the peony buds open, the arrangement will continue to be fresh and beautiful.

"I've had peonies last for a couple weeks in my house, from bud to fully opened," Beth says. "It gives you a chance to enjoy the different stages of color because they start out a lot brighter and turn into an extremely beautiful blush color at their final stage." ■

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