



New Zealand / Tasmania Peony Trip

by
Jan Hanscom

In early December I had the great fun of going to New Zealand and Tasmania to visit peony growers. I went with Sue Kent, Clay Sullivan, Rita Jo Shoultz and Colleen James, all commercial peony growers in Alaska. We visited five farms in New Zealand. All of them were different and had something for us to learn about successfully growing and selling peonies. The first place we went to was Canterbury Fields just outside of Christchurch.

Canterbury Fields

We talked with Bridget Hickman, the grower for this company. She had only worked there for a couple years but obviously had a wonderful farming background. She was committed to growing in as organic a manner as possible. One thing about the people of New Zealand - they were all willing to teach us whatever they had figured out. This sharing can save our Alaska farmers years of experimenting or at least point us in the right direction. Bridget set the tone for all the others we visited, she was wonderful and would just love to spend a summer in Alaska helping us in our peony fields.

(From Bridget- at Canterbury Fields)

Varieties we grow here or export from other growers that I think are worth pursuing:

Coral sunset – good early variety – achieves good prices early in the season

Red Charm – a consistent performer that achieves good prices early

Bridal Gown – a lovely white that is very popular and produces well

Buck Eye Belle – a wonderful rich deep red/maroon with very yellow stamens in the centre that is a very good producer

Many Happy Returns – a love big budded mid to deep pink that is a good producer and strong robust variety

Bowl of Cream – a very popular variety with our exporters and a beautiful big budded flower, good prices achieved for this variety

Diana Parkes – a lovely red quite early in the season, good producer however does need support

Crop management:

Insecticide & Fungicide Spraying – we use Eco-Oil which is an agricultural grade canola oil and SM6 seaweed extract, every couple of weeks once the vegetative stage is underway. I wait until the initial growth has hardened off a wee bit as I am nervous about spraying tender foliage! I am also careful about air temperatures due to the possibility of burning the foliage. I spray when the temperature is 55-60 degrees F. This spray programme is continued until bud expansion when I will ease back on this mixture and then go back in with an insecticide just before harvest. Trials are invaluable to assess how these organic products will work on your crops but we have noticed marked improvement in general plant health and pest/disease resistance with using the oil/seaweed method.

Weed spraying – even with mulch down on our peony blocks we still have to weed spray but try to target this at high weed growth times and always buffer the spray mix with a mix of Fulvic Acid.

Harvesting – we leave 1/3 of the bush behind for future years growth and energy for the tuber. This seems to work well. We cut, take into our grading area, grade according to variety and bud size, place straight into buckets of water, and finally into the chiller. On really warm days we pick quite hard as they will still open between the time we cut the stems and get them into the chiller! Warm overnight temperatures often mean a variety can advance a lot

overnight. These temperatures are monitored with interest as much as the day time temperatures – you kind of end up being a weather geek in this job!

Omeo Peonies - <http://www.omeopeonies.com>

Our second visit was to Omeo Farms. Some of you may remember that Tony and Judy Banks actually visited the Georgeson Botanical Garden on an Alaska visit a few years ago and ran into Pat. She made that original contact that allowed us to make this follow up visit. Actually, two of our travel companions were at Omeo Farms for a whole week before the other three of us arrived. Rita Jo Shoultz and Colleen James worked and learned from these experienced growers, an invaluable experience. Many of the growers we visited in New Zealand learned from working on the Omeo farm as well.

Unlike many of the other growers we visited, Tony and Judy Banks make a living from their farm. They must find more than one way to create income from peonies. On Sunday afternoon, they often have open house and invite the public to visit the farm. Around the house are display gardens and vases of flowers so visitors can see the many flower types and cultivars of peonies they grow. They can order root stock to plant in the fall. Also, senior groups bring vans out to visit and as they leave, they are handed bundles of peonies to take home and make bouquets. Omeo donates flowers for churches and other events in the local area, all to generate interest in peonies and to let people know what they have available.

One of the things that was the most fun at Omeo Farm was the “smoke O”, a nice break during the day to sit and visit. Judy and Tony provided their crew with tea and biscuits for a snack and a nice place in the yard, under a tree to relax and chat for 15 minutes in the morning and afternoon.

Carrick Farm

Next we visited Carrick Farm owned by John Chalmers and his wife. They just moved to this new farm and are putting in new peony beds each year. John and his wife are both policeman in their other life. Many growers had other jobs to pay the bills and were peony farmers for fun or to get a little extra money. John spent a lot of time preparing the soil before planting and it showed. Their plants were only two years old but already very hardy and robust looking. John learned peony growing from the Omeo people and still sells his flowers through their pack house.

Before this year, many small growers like John sold their peonies through larger pack houses, like Omeo and Canterbury Fields. This year the United States, the largest market for New Zealand peonies, has put some restrictions on importing flowers from New Zealand because of the Light Brown Apple Moth (LBAM) found in New Zealand but not in California. There was concern about importing this pest to the USA so all flowers must be inspected. In order to find out if a grower is not being careful in their pest management it is required that each box of flowers all be from one grower and that the exporters be able to trace those flowers back to the farm it came from. As a result, many small growers were having to sell all of their product at farmers markets in New Zealand.

John, however, was an excellent grower and Omeo felt confident they could package, sell his product and not worry about LBAM being found in his boxes. It was suggested that a grower have at least 50 plants of one cultivar to be able to pack one box of buds for market.

There was an irrigation ditch running through his property, but he only had the water rights to take water out for a few hours each week. As a result most farms we saw had holding ponds on their property. When it was their turn to take water, they filled their pond.

Altitude Peonies

Jill and John Smith were perhaps the most generous hosts we came across on our visit. We arrived at one of the most inconvenient times for them possible, right in the middle of a packing day, and had no where to stay in the area. They had a guest house just up the hill and offered it to us free of charge for the night. Then the next day they came back to work early just to visit with us for a few hours before we headed down the road.

Their farm was on the side of a steep hill, had mined soil since they were in the middle of a gold mining district, and their buildings were cobbled together from old refer units and lean-to's covered with a - yes . . . blue tarp!! Alaskan at heart, I think.

Janefield Gardens

Our last stop in New Zealand was Janefield Paeony in Dunedin. Roger and Cindy Wakefield were probably the best set up organization we saw. They had only been in business for a few years and had the advantage of learning from the old timers like Omeo and Altitude. Their pack house was set up very efficiently, they were innovative in their growing practices, having small experimental plots on one small section of the farm, and Roger was president of the New Zealand Peony Society, the research and grower organization for all peony growers in New Zealand.

These two sold to exporters, at local farmers markets, to local florists, and from their farm. They had added hydroponic herbs to their production cycle because it is their intention to make money as a farm. Peonies are only productive for a few weeks each year allowing time for other crops the rest of the year.

Forty Three South - <http://www.43south.com/>

Felicity Langley's farm was our first stop in Tasmania. It is located on the Tasman Peninsula, at latitude 43 south. What a beautiful farm, incredible view and lovely house Felicity had built herself. She devoted the day to showing us her farm. I enjoyed this farm and our next stop in part because they were run by women. It gave me hope for my own business adventure called Polar Peonies.

Felicity kept a daily journal during the season of all her activities, how her plants were growing, fertilizer added, pesticides added, etc. That way she knew from year to year approximately when tasks need to get done. She talked about her marketing frustrations and, it is possible we may encounter some of the same issues. She told us a story about flowers being delivered to a wholesaler in Australia mainland. He claimed they did not arrive in good shape and so the agreed-upon price would be reduced. When she told the wholesaler to send them back rather than take the price he wanted to give her, it turned out they had arrived just fine and were already sold. Obviously Alaska growers must develop trust with wholesalers and always be vigilant lest they try to pull some fast deals on distant growers.

Felicity used a lot of compost because her soil was clayey and heavy. She fenced around her fields to keep out the pesky wallabies. That is one pest we will never have to deal with! She also used sheep manure in the spring as a top dressing then added a slow release fertilizer like Osmocote® immediately after blooming was finished. She recommended that growers, "Walk your fields regularly to make sure you know how your plants are doing. Curled red leaves indicate poor nutrition". Mr. Ed, a cultivar she grew, had some brown edges on the petals which may be a boron deficiency.

Felicity practiced "cold calling" as the season commenced to sell her plants. She followed up with a free sample box to show potential buyers what she could provide. She looked at maps to find upscale businesses and florists that might buy her product. To get them to pay shipping, she reminded them they may be able to pay less and get a better deal because they were a bigger shipper than she was. She suggested always putting a bunch of 'Coral Charm' peonies on the top when sending a sample box because they are so striking. For us, that could be bright reds or some other spectacular looking bloom. She would call buyers to remind them about her product after local growers in their area were done harvesting, then one week later she would call again to ask for an order. Felicity admitted that is not much fun, but that was a way to get more customers.

Pinerise Peony - <http://www.pinerise.com>

Marg Henson's farm was her husband's parent's apricot farm before she converted it into peonies. Her husband was a mechanic but helps Marg now when the peonies are blooming and does mechanic work on the side. As the peony season gets started his engine repairs are moved out and peony sorting takes over. Then when the peony season is done, he gets his garage back. She used a hay mower side sickle bar to cut stems and a hay rake to clean off the plots. One thing we noticed in this part of the world where there was a long history of farming, people adapted other implements for use in their fields. In Alaska, implements to adapt are few and far between, but that does not mean we cannot be creative in getting equipment to do the jobs we need done.

Marg kept a record on a sheet of plywood of how many bundles she made up each day. She said that tradition was started by her husband's parents as a record of apricot harvest. She just keeps it going with peony bundles. It is a visual record of each year's yield and how it compares with other seasons and how well the current harvest is progressing.

Peonies from Tasmania

Peter Botting and his wife Julie stopped by the Georgeson Botanical Garden last summer while visiting a relative in Alaska. It was so much fun visiting with him, we just had to add a visit to his farm while we were in the area - so to speak. The timing was a bit odd - they were two weeks behind on harvest due to cooler than normal weather and Peter was going into the hospital in a week to get both his knees replaced. As usual with farming - either you are incredibly busy or not but you do not get to decide when that is, the plants do that for you.

Peter Botting and Hans van Niekerk are partners in potentially the most ambitious project we visited on our trip. Peter has a big vision. He wants to have 400,000 plants on their farms before he is done. I'd say they have a long way to go. Their infrastructure was not ready to handle even a fraction of the stems that many plants will produce. Of course, they had nowhere near that many plants yet, either. They had a conveyor belt to move bundles to be wrapped in rubber bands, then into bags and into boxes. They stored the cut flowers already packed in the boxes and did not care what the cultivar was, only the color. They did not put the top on the box until it was packed to take to the shipper. Also, they sold only full boxes

while others we have seen have sold in half boxes mostly. Their system is based on methods in Holland. This will not be a mom and pop-type farm.

Peter drove us around to see his fields. He has extended the growing season by starting at sea level and going up to 1000 ft and then 2000 ft to get later maturity dates. The bloom season was pretty short and harvest time compressed into only a few weeks even with early, mid and late cultivars. Probably in most places an eight-weeks to harvest period is possible just with using different cultivars. By moving up in altitude, the season may be stretched out the same as moving north in latitude. Combining that with different cultivars it may be possible to manipulate the season quite a bit. In Alaska, the season will be extended by moving from Fairbanks to Homer and maybe even Juneau.

We learned quite a lot from our visits down under. Growers in New Zealand are not that different from Alaskans, and I am confident we can apply a lot of the lessons learned to making the Alaska peony market a success.

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