



Peony Update

by
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This season we completed year two of our experiment to learn if peonies can be grown as cut flowers in Alaska. In 2002, we began an evaluation of 30 varieties of peonies in raised beds covered with black landscape fabric. Most cultivars grew well although from the beginning we identified several that probably would not make the grade as cut flowers. Vegetative growth was slow, stems were short, and the flowers were tiny. Although many of the flowers we tested probably would not make commercial cut flowers, they still have value in the home garden. It is definitely worth a trip to the very back of the garden in the perennial trials to view these peonies. Besides, when the flowers are blooming in July and August, there is no more impressive sight in the garden than rows upon rows of huge peonies!

We continued our evaluations in 2003, adding to our understanding of peony cultivation. In the huge Holland flower markets, the cultivars Sarah Bernhardt (pink double), Duchess de Nemours (white double) and Dr. Alexander Fleming (pink double) are favorites. 'Sarah Bernhardt' accounts for nearly 50 percent of the entire sales because it is highly productive and blooms right in the middle of the June wedding season. In Alaska, our crops would miss the June weddings but 'Sarah Bernhardt', at first inspection, is an early leader in flowering productivity along with Felix Crouse and Bowl of Beauty (Table 1).

Unfortunately, numbers can be deceiving. The total number of flower buds produced as well as the range of buds per plant are very impressive for the top three cultivars. However, the actual number of buds to reach full bloom is significantly lower than the total number of buds (column 5). We have encountered a condition called bud blast where the flower buds become brown, leathery and never open. This disorder is the result of aborted flower buds and could be due to winter kill, poor nutrition, age of the plant and more. Certainly, it will be a big factor in whether peonies become a commercial crop for Alaska. In any case, it is important to identify all obstacles, or should I say challenges, that will face anyone interested in growing peonies in Alaska for cut flower production.

Table 1. Top ten peony cultivars in flower bud production for 2003.

Cultivar	Flower color	Average number buds/plant	Range of buds per plant	Average number full bloom
Sarah Bernhardt	Pink, double	11.2	4 - 18	3.9
Felix Crouse	Red, double	10.5	5 - 15	2.7
Bowl of Beauty	Pink	8.8	2-17	3.8
David Harum	Red, double	6.5	2-13	1.7
Karl Rosenfield	Red, double	8.0	1-16	2.8
Louis Van Houtte	Red, double	8.0	5-12	2.8
Duchess de Nemours	White, double	4.8	2-8	3.8

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Cultivar	Flower color	Average number buds/plant	Range of buds per plant	Average number full bloom
Nancy Nichols	White, double	4.0	1-6	0.5
Pink Parfait	Pink	4.3	1-8	1.3
Festiva Maxima	White, red flecks	3.3	0-6	1.7

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