In its fourth year, American Flowers Week celebrates U.S.-grown (and foraged) botanicals with five fresh, inspiring and handcrafted couture looks.
Peony farming keeps pace with commercial fishing as important income source for Homer.

In July, Kelly Shore, of Damascus, Md.-based Petals by the Shore, and Beth Van Sandt, co-owner with her husband Kurt Weichhand of Homer, Alaska-based Scenic Place Peonies, documented a quintessential moment for Alaska-grown peonies, all in celebration of American Flowers Week. Their peony-centric collaborations occurred when Kelly traveled to Homer as the featured floral designer for the Field to Vase Dinner at Scenic Place Peonies. She also designed and produced a romantic styled shoot photographed in the farm’s peony fields (which appeared in Florists’ Review in October 2017).

“I met Beth and Kurt when they came to volunteer at last year’s First Lady’s Luncheon in Washington, DC,” Kelly explains. “It made me want to learn more about what they do, to immerse myself in the farm culture and understand what makes Alaska’s peonies different than peonies here in the lower 48.”

Homer is known as “The City of Peonies” in acknowledgment of the attention the flower has brought to local agriculture, business and tourism. Yet, Homer is also known for its dynamic fishing industry, which touches Beth and Kurt’s lives as personally as peonies. Beth wanted the American Flowers Week photo shoot to reflect Homer’s two economic engines – commercial fishing and peony farming. “I grew the flowers, and Kurt harvests wild Alaska salmon, and we’re passionate about both catches,” she points out. “I grow the flowers, and Kurt harvests wild Alaska salmon, and we’re passionate about both catches,” she points out.

“Everything I learned growing peonies in Homer,” Beth says, “helped me grow peonies in my Washington, D.C., kitchen garden.” Their peony-centric collaborations occurred when Kelly traveled to Homer as the featured floral designer for the Field to Vase Dinner at Scenic Place Peonies.

In July, Scenic Place Peonies’ crew begins cutting peonies during the second week of July and continues to the second week of August. About 1.5 acres are devoted to growing 6,000 peony plants representing 14 varieties. Homer is known as “The City of Peonies” in acknowledgment of the attention the flower has brought to local agriculture, business and tourism. Yet, Homer is also known for its dynamic fishing industry, which touches Beth and Kurt’s lives as personally as peonies. Beth wanted the American Flowers Week photo shoot to reflect Homer’s two economic engines – commercial fishing and peony farming. “I grew the flowers, and Kurt harvests wild Alaska salmon, and we’re passionate about both catches,” she points out.

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For Kelly, her time spent in Homer’s peony world was deeply moving. “I felt such a connection, and I wanted to express how being there influenced me. That meant making sure every part of my art and my creativity was representative of the location.”

In Homer, “I had this whole vision of the pink flowers popping off the bluesness of the water and the sky and the glaciers. And I love seeing this feminine flower against the ruggedness of that maritime setting.”

Ashley Johnson, a flower-farmer-in-training who spent the summer as an intern at Scenic Place Peonies, agreed to model for the peony-and-fishing storyline. She wore a pair of white bib overalls, the female version of the bright orange Grunden overalls typically worn by commercial fishing pros and many peony farmers. “I wanted the net of peonies to almost be part of Ashley’s attire, as if she was pulling up this teeming catch of flowers,” Kelly says. Adding peony petals to the suspender straps and adorning Ashley’s head with a full crown of peonies further incorporated the flowers.

Homer’s famous Katchemak Bay and the majestic glaciers in the distance are a constant presence for Homer’s fishing and flower farming cultures, Beth points out. “While I’m harvesting peonies in my field, Kurt is harvesting for fish in the inlet. The two seasons are pretty much parallel.”

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