

PASSION FOR PEONIES

PEONIES IN JULY? Flourishing in the fields of Alaska, no less?

Yes, indeed. At the invitation of several Alaska peony growers, I spent a glorious week at the height of summer visiting fifteen farms between North Pole and Fritz Creek. There is something quite magical that happens in this land of high latitudes, where the summer days last for 22 hours and nighttime is barely acknowledged. The short but intensely bright summers and their ideal conditions of light, temperature, soil and altitude make it possible to grow and harvest peonies at a time when no one else in the world can do so – between the end of June and September.

Once considered old-fashioned, the symbol of Memorial Day, peonies are now an oft-requested



wedding flower. Brides see dreamy bouquets in glossy magazines and they want to carry that romance down the aisle. Until recently, however, peony-themed weddings in late summer were simply not possible.

During the past decade Dr. Patricia Holloway of the University of Alaska at Fairbanks has been conducting peony crop trials at Georgeson Botanic Garden. Her work confirms that peony plants survive Alaska's winters under an insulating blanket of snow only to explode into bloom as soon as things warm up. Her expertise

has inspired more than 50 small family farms to plant peonies; increasingly, Alaska is making wedding clients in the lower 48 states very happy – from the DIY bride to the couture floral designer.

I returned from my Alaska tour with visions of peonies dancing in my head, as well as the real deal: boxes of just-picked blooms. Several growers sent me home with their flowers, and frankly, I couldn't bring myself to add a single other botanical element to the vase. What you see here is pure beauty – a perfect bouquet of the season.

Learn more about ordering Alaska-grown peonies at www.alaskapeonies.org.

Ingredients:

- 10 stems 'Sorbet' peonies, grown by Echo Lake Peonies in Soldotna, Alaska
- 5 stems 'Kansas' peonies, grown by Midnight Sun Peonies in Soldotna, Alaska

Vase:

- 9-inch tall x 7-inch diameter vintage Haegar urn, cream pottery
- or
- Series of vintage one-pint glass milk bottles (7-inch tall), each holding two or three stems



From the Farmer

Peony harvesting and design: Cut peonies during the coolest part of the day. According to Dr. Holloway, "Cut once you see the true color of the flower with one or two petals separating at the top – or any time after that. Then, the flower will continue to open in your arrangement." If you cut prior to this stage the buds either will not open or they will be stunted. Fully-opened blooms can also be harvested, but their vase life is shorter.

Based on years of peony research and field trials, Dr. Holloway offers this commercial growers' tip: "Once cut, your flowers should be chilled in the refrigerator for at least 24 hours and up to one week before putting them into a vase. That chilling very definitely extends vase life." Wrap the peonies in paper towels and lay them flat in the crisper drawer, away from the refrigerator's other contents until use.