

GROWERTALKS

Under an Acre

7/27/2015

Rewriting Life

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The dream of Chilly Root Peony Farm began on a cold, dark January in Homer, Alaska. In a region that was surrounded by glaciers, the wind and cooler temperatures, a peony farm may seem a risky venture. However, it was one that Michelle LaFriniere readily embraced.

Born on a homestead in Northern Minnesota, Michelle learned about the bounty that the land could provide both as a livelihood and as a lifestyle. Her father was an independent logger and her mother was what Michelle fondly describes as a rabid organic gardener. It was from them that she learned the importance of staying connected with the land.



"I remember my mother shaking her finger at me saying if anyone tries to sell you something that you can do or make yourself, that's your clue that it's a scam," said Michelle. She said that her mother would berate the chemical companies for trying to convince farmers that they needed chemicals to rid the farm of disease, pests and weeds. Ahead of her time, her mother believed that the key to a healthy farm was about having good compost and keeping the soil healthy. A philosophy, that, years later, Michelle would adopt on her farm.

Anxious to see the world, 18-year-old Michelle convinced her girlfriend to join her on an adventure to Alaska. But unlike her friend, who returned at the end of the summer, Michelle's ticket was one-way.

"It was the first time I had ever seen the ocean. We landed on a gravel runway surrounded by towering spruce trees. I felt like you could be anything you wanted to be, you could rewrite your life," said Michelle.

Her Alaskan lifestyle began on a fishing boat, where she learned about the industry and built a livelihood. Five years later, Michelle met and fell in love with her husband Michael Poole, a fellow fisherman. They began their life together on the water, living on a floating houseboat, while their family started to grow.

It was a beautiful life, described Michelle, but upon the birth of their second son, Ashton, the two decided to purchase a piece of land. Fishing remained an essential part of their lifestyle and livelihood, but Michelle craved more, and so she launched herself into new opportunities, including a retail store owner and ceramic tile artist. It was this love for new opportunities that would eventually bring Michelle to her current passion—the owner and head grower of Chilly Root Peony Farm.

Research from the University of Alaska was promoting that the cooler climate of Alaska could potentially fill the gap in the cut flower peony industry. Her husband was quick to jump on board. A Californian native with a horticultural background, his only question was: “Could I have a tractor?” Michelle quickly said yes and Chilly Root Peony Farm was born.

At an altitude of 1,495 feet, the terrain is open to both the cooler climates and winds that at times can tear through the area. Difficult doesn’t begin to describe that first year for Michelle. Being the main source of help, Michelle knew that she needed to design the farm and fields to be fairly low maintenance. Each of the peonies would be placed in raised beds, double rows and covered with landscape fabric to reduce the weeding. With three fields to prepare and very little extra labor, they toiled away at preparing the land and planting those first roots.

“We did a beautiful job prepping the soil. We hauled in amendments and we had friends that had horses, so we dug down at the underlayer and enriched the soil with compost,” said Michelle. “We did a lot of cool things in the first field that we were too tired to do by the time it came to our third field.”

Michelle can remember standing up after a full day of planting and becoming overwhelmed by the thousands of holes that still needed to be planted. However, with the help of some hired hands, they got the job done and simply held their breath that winter to see what came up. Thankfully, the majority of the plants survived and the growth continued, with Michelle planting a second field and then a third field a few years later.

Maintaining and finding labor is one of the biggest challenges of having a farm in Alaska. “Finding labor is something for people to think about when they are considering becoming a peony farm in Alaska,” said Michelle. “It’s the maintenance that is a paramount issue because you really do have to take care of them or you will lose them.”

Surrounded by glaciers and a high elevation, the harsh winds can also create some havoc. Despite the potential plant damage, Michelle advises that the wind provides good air circulation, which in turn helps with disease prevention. For their more delicate plants, like the coral peonies, she’s added a plastic trellis support and a mesh green wind barrier. Each year is easier, shared Michelle, as she learns better ways to not only plant the fields, but ensure healthy plant growth.

This year, the climate has been unseasonably warm, dramatically pushing up the season. “We will be cutting in 10 to 14 days for sure, in mid-July. It’s so early. Just a few years ago, I never expected to get a cut until August 10. Last year, it was the earliest ever,” said Michelle. “There are farms at a lower elevation that are already starting their harvest in June, which is just bizarre. I barely have dandelions in June, usually.”

Climate change has increased awareness on several concerns, including looking at more natural farming

methods, like organic and biodynamic farming practices. Seven years ago, when Michelle launched the farm, organic methods were largely balked at. Despite this resistance, Michelle stuck with it and continued to implement such practices as compost tea and companion planting. Today, these same farmers that once balked at the word organic are now calling Michelle for advice.

Staying true to her beliefs, the future for Chilly Root Peony Farm looks promising. Michelle hopes to continue to expand the business while implementing easier techniques, like an automated watering system, to respond to the growing demand of Alaskan-grown peonies. According to Michelle, it's a brand new pioneering industry, which seems appropriate for a pioneering state and a modern pioneer like her. **GT**

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