

GrowerTalks
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Weekly news and commentary from GrowerTalks magazine.

January 31, 2008

This week, *GrowerTalks* is in Fairbanks, Alaska, where the "high" Wednesday was 15 below. Which, to be honest, felt almost balmy compared to the 26 below I experienced while snapping pictures of the Alaska pipeline Tuesday morning at 9:30 a.m., which also happened to coincide with sunrise (sunset was around 4 p.m.).



All of which, I think, paints a fairly descriptive picture of the 49th state, which I'm visiting this week as a guest of the Alaska Greenhouse & Nursery Conference. Hosted by the University of Alaska Cooperative Extension, the event drew about 100 folks from an amazingly wide variety of backgrounds, from growers and academics to people considering this wacky business as a second career. They heard two days of seminars, including my two talks on trends. Plus, I moderated a consumer panel.

As always, I took a day to visit local greenhouses. Now, I

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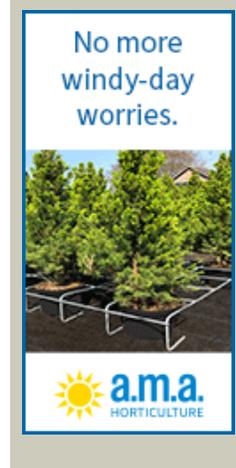
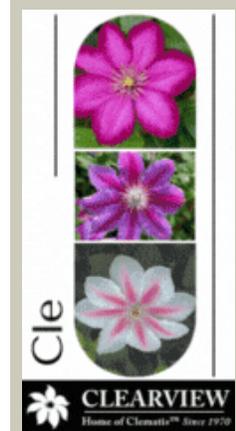


don't expect to see a lot of action in greenhouses in January, but in Fairbanks, which is just 180 miles south of the Arctic Circle, I knew there'd be nothing happening but snow. Still, I wanted to see what an Alaskan greenhouse looks like (much like yours, actually). My guides for the day, retailers Nancy Macfarlane, Cyndie Warbelow-Tack and Cyndie's daughter, Kaari, showed me a great day of sights, including Fairbanks's only year-round garden center, Holm Town Nursery. During our day (which started, appropriately enough, with sourdough pancakes and reindeer sausage), I made the following observations:



Sam's Sourdough Restaurant

1. Alaska is like several different states when it comes to weather and growing conditions. Fairbanks is colder than Anchorage, but Anchorage is much windier. Some places down south are considered almost tropical, and valleys and mountain ranges produce a wide range of microclimates. It's not quite Florida/Arizona/Michigan/Oregon, but it's close.
2. Fairbanks is not unlike Minnesota. I saw some stunning Alaskan scenery while flying in, but Fairbanks itself is in a flat valley. No mountains, just gentle hills and stunted black spruce growing from the permafrost. Pretty, but not a postcard. Normal, even, with nary an igloo in sight.





Noon in Alaska

3. The greenhouses that are open year-round do not sell bait, kerosene, angle iron or chewing tobacco. I though they would. Maybe they do in Coldfoot or Deadhorse.



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Inside Holm Town Nursery

4. Spring starts at about the same time here as in the "lower 48." Garden centers open as early as late April or early May if it's warm, although it can still snow. Mid-May to mid-June is the crazy season; no matter what the weather, garden centers boom. After that it pretty much dies. There are no "shoulder" seasons here. The end of September ends the season.

5. For Alaskans, gardening is a necessity, not a luxury, said Nancy Macfarlane. I thought cabin fever was bad in Chicago. Here, it's a terminal disease, and I've only been here 48 hours! Cyndie Warbelow-Tack told me that one spring she did 20% of her annual sales in four days!

6. I tried, but you can't pigeonhole Alaskans. Yes, you've got hairy mountain men, people running away from something, and people seeking to become one with nature. But you've got temporary military, art-loving academics, snow-bird retirees, world travelers, affluent transplants and anyone else you can think of.

7. Favorite crops are the same as yours: calibrachoa, vegetative petunias and osteospermum (especially orange and yellow).

8. "Lobelia is as Alaskan as salmon and moose," somebody told me. But calibrachoa may be taking over that position.

9. I haven't met a single husky, but I've met half a dozen long-haired cats, most of whom are named for plants, such as Petunia, after whom the coffee shop at Holm Town is named.

10. Veggie sales are only a fraction of flower sales. I thought the typical Alaskan gardener would buy flat after flat of vegetable plants for his or her ¼ acre veggie garden and do loads of fall canning so they can survive the winter. Wrong. Those kind of gardeners (they do exist) start everything from seed. The typical garden center customer buys a few veggies, but buys lots of flowers, especially the new vegetative stuff. Big mixed hanging baskets are very popular.

11. If they need food, they don't shoot a bear. They go to Safeway or Fred Meyer.

12. Fairbanks has a Wal-Mart, a Lowes, and a Home Depot (side by side). At Lowes, you can buy a nice 4-in. foliage plant for \$2.97 and a nice 6-in. for \$9.97. How does Burnaby Lakes grow it and then truck it 2,300 miles from BC and it's still so cheap? (Click [HERE](#) to tell me.)



13. Pavement is a sign of conspicuous consumption. You can have 10 snowmobiles, two boats and a camper, and that's okay. But if you've got a paved driveway, you're showing off.

14. Women are prevalent in the garden center business up here. In fact, other than Jim Holm, owner of Holm Town Nursery (and a former Alaska state legislator), all the business owners or co-owners I met were women. And Jim, who's 62, is selling his business to 15-year-employee Karina Selby, so the future of at least one Fairbanks retailer is not only in the hands of a woman, but a Gen-X woman. Her goal, she says, is to get more of her peers gardening.



Karina and Jim

15. There might be an oil pipeline here, but it doesn't help. Growers can't tap into it. Winter heating for Holm Town's 5,000 sq. ft. retail greenhouse runs \$5,500 a month for natural gas, plus \$2,000 for electric (\$700 of which is fuel surcharge). That's why most greenhouses don't start planting until March 1, or even later if possible. Speaking of surcharges, an invoice for a delivery from Seattle showed a 24.5% fuel surcharge, port charges and

a "keep from freezing" charge.



16. Speaking of power, the static electricity jolt delivered by my hotel room doorknob would drop a moose (we saw three of them during our Tuesday greenhouse tour).

All in all, it's a state you must visit. And having heard just how crazy the spring season is, I need to find a way back in May.

See you next time,

Chris

Chris Beytes
Editor
GrowerTalks

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