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# The Cut Flower

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for growers of field and greenhouse specialty cuts

## Alaska Stems is Farming on the Last Frontier

Jodi Helmer



*Homer might be known as the City of Peonies but almost no one was growing cut flowers in the coastal Alaska community when Rachel Lord started Alaska Stems.*



Rachel Lord

### Hot Commodity in a Cold Climate

Alaska Stems grew quickly. Lord added high tunnels, a greenhouse, and an irrigation tank to the farm. With a quarter acre of land in production, she grows 40 different varieties of annuals and perennials, including amaranthus, poppies, stock, gladiolus, echinacea, sunflowers, and lilies.

There are a lot of misconceptions about growing flowers in Alaska. The farm is located in USDA zone 6a and Lord harvests from mid-April to October. High tunnels and the greenhouse extend the growing season. Temperatures rarely get above 70 degrees, even in the middle of summer, and overnight lows in August can dip down to the mid-40s in the coastal region.

“Flowers seemed like a great niche opportunity—and they were,” Lord says.

The decision to establish a flower farm coincided with the introduction of the National Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) hoop house grants program. Lord received funding to install a 30 x 72 hoop house on her 13-acre hillside property, and turned “terrible ag land” into a thriving flower farm. She sold her first flowers in 2012.

Rachel took a slow and steady approach to building the business, signing up for a “space available” booth at the farmers’ market, selling to a small grocery store, and supplying flowers for one wedding. While she describes her success as a “slow burn,” her love of flower farming was instantaneous.

“It was 100 percent trial and error,” she says. “The first time I delivered a bucket of flowers to the bakery and café and saw people light up when I walked inside, I realized, ‘Wow, this is soul feeding.’”

The community also loved having access to locally-grown flowers; Lord even convinced a skeptical friend to embrace the fresh cut blooms.

“When we first started, she was very kind but thought we should be growing food people could eat,” Lord says. “I started bringing her flowers; I would drop them off at her house and that winter she started buying them at the grocery store. She said, ‘It’s so powerful to have fresh flowers in my home.’”



"One of the biggest challenges is the brevity of our growing season," says Lord. "But we have a huge benefit here: There are a lot of plants that are considered to be 'one-shot wonders' that burn out quickly, and we don't get burnout on our plants."

Ranunculus is a prime example. Most growers have to start ranunculus early so it blooms before the heat of the summer; in Homer, the temperatures are never hot enough to hamper ranunculus production, she adds.

There are some flowers, like celosia, that need hot weather; Lord stopped trying to cultivate them on her farm. Zinnias, which are staples in the lower 48, are rare in Alaska.

"Here, when I bring them to the farmers' market, people are like, 'What are those? Those are so cool,'" she says.



### Growing into the Next Decade

The climate isn't the only challenge. Homer has a population of just over 5,000 residents and Anchorage, the nearest city, is four and a half hours away. Residents of the small town have shown big support for the farm. Alaska Stems has a bustling weekly subscription service and is a go-to vendor for tourists who travel to Alaska to elope.

"It's hard to go with one foot in every pot from a marketing perspective, but in a small community and a small state, it might also be what is necessary,"

Lord says. "We do have a really large tourism economy; we have beautiful mountains and glaciers and beaches so this is a hot destination for weddings."

The COVID-19 pandemic had an impact on tourism (and business) and ongoing supply chain issues remain challenging. In fact, Lord, normally plants 20,000 tulip bulbs but was able to get only 8,000 thanks to shipping delays, and local bulb suppliers are nonexistent.

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After a two-year hiatus from the farmers' market, Lord plans to return for the 2022 season. While she admits selling at the market has a lower return on investment than other sales channels, it offers a benefit she can't get anywhere else.

"The farmers' market takes a massive amount of time; we make money but not a ton of money and I'm definitely not there for the cash," she says. "It's a soul-feeding, community-building experience and I love it. I get to chat with half the town plus a lot of people visiting from out of state; I get a lot of energy from that."

Although Homer boasts 25 thriving commercial peony farms, Lord isn't interested in shipping flowers to states in the lower 48, but she is considering expanding into new markets. This season, Lord is exploring the potential to increase sales to florists, especially in the Anchorage market.

"I've never done sales to florists because we don't have that many of them," she says. "Because shipping is such a mess up here, I'm playing around with whether we could shift some focus to cranking out high quality, beautiful, in-demand stems and how profitable and satisfying that could be."

A "major scale up in employment" will give Lord the time to consider her next move. She's hired a full-time farm manager and part-time staff to help on the farm this season.

Although Lord has been running Alaska Stems for a decade, she is still amazed at the impact fresh flowers can have on a community.

"The more people who are loving flowers, the better it is for everybody," she says. "We want to develop that

culture and appreciation for the impact of fresh flowers in your home or in your business, [and] it's been really cool to help nurture that here in town."

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