



THE LAST ROSE FARM IN OREGON

For three generations, the Peterkort family has produced beautiful roses domestically, despite relentless competition from South America

America's love affair with roses is inarguably the number one story in the floral world. According to the Society of American Florists, 196 million roses are produced for Valentine's Day alone. But only a fraction of them are grown domestically.

Most U.S.-grown roses hail from California, which accounts for 75 percent of the nation's output. Yet in Oregon, a small-scale grower called Peterkort Roses has been raising hybrid tea roses for the floral trade since the 1930s. The third-generation family farm currently produces 2 million roses annually, using many sustainable growing practices.

"We are an anachronism of the past," says **Sandra Peterkort Laubenthal**, granddaughter of Joseph and Bertha Peterkort, who came to Oregon from Germany and started raising flowers in 1923 on a portion of land owned by a farming cousin. "They originally grew gerberas, sweet peas and pansies. It was fortunate that they had five children to help with all that work."

During the 1930s they planted rose crops, beginning the family's long tradition with the flower that gave Portland its nickname, The City of Roses. Rose varieties with poetic names like 'Moonstruck' and 'Tara' comprise about 75 percent of the production, but Peterkort is also known for its gorgeous lilies, orchids, maidenhair ferns and ornamental holly. Sixteen greenhouses add up to six acres of flower-producing land.

In the past, Oregon was home to several commercial cut roses growers, but slowly, those operations have either shifted to other flower crops or folded altogether. "We have this certain niche, and we really want to support the local floral industry," Sandra says. "If there's going to be a local rose grower, it seems like the City of Roses ought to have one."



Above: Sandra Peterkort Laubenthal is a third-generation rose grower who brings modern-day "green" growing practices to the flower farm that's been in her family since 1923.

Opposite: 'Classic Cezanne', an ivory rose with mauve-pink edges, is just one of Peterkort's many popular varieties. Designers love the beautiful, just-harvested roses because they are easy to work with, last long in the vase and in bouquets, and are grown locally by people they know.



Embracing change

As new-generation rose farmers, Sandra and her brother **Norman Peterkort**, the company's manager, face increasing competition from foreign rose growers, as well as rising energy costs at home. Says Sandra: "Our challenge is to find affordable ways to change with the industry and continue doing what we're doing." Where Sandra is outgoing and Norman is quieter, when you talk with them, it's evident that these siblings share a devotion to their flower-growing legacy.

Like many greenhouse growers, Peterkort uses a hydroponic farming system. Plants are grown above ground in a substrate, such as coconut fiber, which keeps the roots isolated in a controlled environment. Irrigation and rose food are delivered through micro-tubing direct to the plants' root zone.

Most roses grown for the cut flower trade are hybrid teas or related varieties that continue to produce flowers if they receive enough heat and light (versus old

garden roses that are generally single-bloomers). In order to grow on a twelve-month cycle, Peterkort uses artificial light during months when daylight hours shorten, which does increase energy costs. "Admittedly, it doesn't make a lot of sense to be growing roses in the wintertime, but we're trying to be different from the competition," Norman points out. "While roses coming out of South America don't have heating costs, they do have transportation costs."

Price alone can't be used to compare Peterkort's 25-stem bunch of hybrid tea roses, which have a \$20 wholesale price, with a similar number of larger Colombia-grown roses that wholesale for around \$26.

"In the final analysis, a lot of people just buy on size," Norman acknowledges. "Yes, discerning customers will look at where the roses were grown and how they perform – and we can compete on that level, of course. We can't always afford to compete on price. If we want to survive we have to be better marketers."

By offering Northwest roses on a year-round basis, Peterkort satisfies floral designers and their customers who value locally-grown, natural-looking flowers. Changing taste levels have also helped drive demand, as was recently documented by a Society of American Florists report that the "fresh-picked" look, including wildflowers and garden roses, is on the rise among wedding customers.

Homegrown roses

Peterkort's elegant blooms look vastly different from the softball-sized imported ones that consumers gobble up by the dozen every February 14th. Instead, the farm's 50-plus rose varieties are closer to what you might see gracing a mixed perennial border in the garden. Specialties include the classic hybrid tea rose, with upright, spiraled petals; a German-bred hybrid tea that features multi-petal characteristics of an old garden rose; and dainty spray roses with many tiny blooms on a single stem.

Designers count on Peterkort as an important local rose source for bridal bouquets, boutonnieres, flower girl wreaths and tabletop arrangements – available in a palette that begins with pure white roses and ends with ones bearing dark, velvety black-red petals. Unlike unscented imported roses, these have a light, pleasing fragrance. Because Peterkort harvests its flowers one day and sells them the next, the roses are super-fresh and, as a result, are long-lasting in the vase.

Below: Bunches of just-picked 'Peach Avalanche' roses showcase the variety's giant head, fluffy garden look, and greenish outer petals.



Above, from top: Standing in one of several greenhouses where lilies are produced, Norman Peterkort manages the flower farm that he and his siblings inherited from their parents. Peterkort Roses is committed to supplying Northwest floral designers with fresh, healthy and locally-grown roses; Peterkort's greenhouse growing methods allow for the year-round production of roses for the local floral design trade.





Above: At its nursery outside Portland, Oregon, Peterkort Roses grows 2 million picture-perfect roses each year. The flowers are harvested and processed by hand and then graded by stem-length before being bunched and delivered to the flower market.

“I’ve been ordering roses from Peterkort for four years,” says designer **Melissa Feveyear**, owner of Seattle-based Terra Bella Floral Design, who specializes in organic flowers. With varieties like ‘Piano Freiland’, a red, peony-shaped rose, and spray rose clusters that last several weeks in a vase, Peterkort’s blooms make up in quality what they don’t have in size, she says. Admittedly, the 1- to 2-inch flower head is nearly half that of an imported rose, but for many designers and consumers who prefer a softer, romantic bloom, this is not an issue.

For what Melissa calls “bouquet work,” nothing compares with these local blooms. “Because Peterkort’s stems are thinner than (those of) imported roses, they’re very easy to use in hand-tied bouquets. You can group a bunch together for really stunning impact without making the stem too bulky for a bride to handle. And because they are so pliable, the heads don’t snap off like thicker, woodier rose stems. I like curving the stems of a Peterkort rose so the bouquet flowers are facing outward rather than up at the bride.”

Meet the rose farmer

Peterkort sells direct to wedding, event and floral designers through its stall at the Portland Flower Market, a five-day-a-week wholesale market owned by the Oregon Flower Growers Association. Here’s where you’ll find Sandra early in the mornings, personally filling orders, consulting with designers, and serving as the “face” of Peterkort Roses. She’s even perky at 6 a.m. “We’ve always maintained that direct-to-the-florist relationship,” she says. “If you have a problem with your product, wouldn’t it be nice to talk with the person who actually grew it versus an anonymous grower in South America?”

Being the go-to rose source is nothing new. Peterkort Roses was one of the founding members of the market, which began in 1942 and is now located in Portland’s Swan Island Industrial Park. “We get great feedback from designers about rose colors, shapes and ways they are using each variety,” Sandra points out. “And we come to the rescue whenever there’s a ‘floral emergency,’ which inevitably occurs on Fridays. We’re there for the people who forget to order ahead of time, or who have a last-minute event.”

The reciprocal relationship allows Peterkort to share a high level of product information with floral designers. “And in turn, this knowledge allows the designers to tell their customers the story of our roses and how to care for them,” Sandra adds.

Sandra, Norman, and their crew of 15 employees are indeed the last rose growers in Oregon. A message on the company’s web site helps to explain their popularity: “What can we say about a bunch of people who are still dedicated to growing cut flower roses in the U.S.? Though most of our former colleagues have been knocked out, we continue because we are obsessed.”



Above, from top: Peterkort’s roses blend beautifully with other fresh ingredients to create mixed floral arrangements; a clutch of free-range hens (plus one bossy rooster) reside in Peterkort’s greenhouses where they happily feast on weeds and pests that would otherwise diminish the floral crops.

How to grow a sustainable rose

Commitment and creativity are essential tools to maintain intensive, year-round rose production in Peterkort’s 16 greenhouses in Hillsboro, Oregon, which falls in U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Zone 8 (minimum winter temperatures of 10-20 degrees Fahrenheit).

“In some ways, we’ve come full circle,” Norman says. “In the old days, when our grandparents were growing roses, they were doing it organically, such as spreading cow manure to fertilize.” Today, the company uses as many sustainable growing practices as possible. “Roses do require extra care,” he acknowledges, “with a lot of direct human intervention to keep them healthy and productive.” Here are some of the practices in place:

- During the winter months, Peterkort increases the amount of artificial light used in the greenhouses, thereby producing more flowers in less space with the same amount of heat.
- Energy curtains have been installed in each greenhouse for added insulation. Made of Mylar and suspended from wires along the greenhouse roof, the panels are closed at night, containing the heat within.
- Working with the Oregon State University Extension Service, Peterkort has developed its own Integrated Pest Management (IPM) approach. The insect ecosystem uses biological controls to suppress aphids, spider mites, thrips and white flies, predators who favor roses.
- Diseases are suppressed by controlling the growing environment, including maintaining ideal temperature, humidity and air circulation levels. Peterkort selects disease-resistant rose varieties and keeps the growing area cleared of dead leaves and debris. “Sometimes, though, the outside conditions are just too overwhelming and we must spray to save the roses,” Sandra says. “We use mild solutions that the Environmental Protection Agency designates ‘reduced risk,’ which are safer to handle, do not require protective clothing or restricted re-entry times.”
- A clutch of resident chickens and one rooster not only live inside the greenhouses, they help with weed and pest control. Left to “freely range,” the hens can be found pecking at tasty bugs and weeds in between the flower rows.
- All packaging is recycled and roses are wrapped for market in newspaper purchased from a local charity.