A LITTLE OVER A DECADE AGO, just about the only peonies growing in Alaska were a few backyard bushes. Now 24 farms belong to the Alaska Peony Growers Association.

Horticulture Professor Pat Holloway said commercial production began in 2004 with small test plots in Fairbanks, Kenai and Homer. By 2012, more than 100,000 roots had been planted by 38 growers. The projected statewide harvest for 2015 is over 1 million peony stems.

By surveying 38 growers, Holloway determined sales of fresh-cut peony stems doubled from 2011 to 2012. More than 25,000 stems were sold in 2013, at $2 to $10 per stem.

Holloway, who initiated peony trials at the Georgeson Botanical Garden, tracks growth and development of the new industry. “Growers, industry support groups, legislative leaders, educational and research organizations need to know basic statistics on crop production, markets and growth in order to support and fund activities that promote this industry,” Holloway said. “Hard numbers also provide a great wow factor.”

Peony growing is a long-term investment for farmers because roots take several years to produce buds that can be sold and there is a steep learning curve surrounding soil quality and fertilizers. Professor Mingchu Zhang has determined that peonies require 16 essential nutrients. “Each one is irreplaceable,” he said. “If one is missing the plant won’t perform.”

- Cooperative Extension Service agents work with potential and existing peony growers, offering workshops, nutrient analysis and pesticide recommendations and making site visits to peony farms.

- There were 75,264 stems harvested in Alaska in 2014. Six growers sold to national and international (Canada and Taiwan) markets either individually or through a pack house.

- The variety Sarah Bernhardt and white blossoms are the top sellers, followed by corals, creams and blush pink.

A bumblebee is attracted to a peony at the Georgeson Botanical Garden.