

# *- THE ROUGH GRAFT -*

NEWSLETTER OF SOLARIS FARMS, REEDSVILLE, WI



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*2020 marks some big changes for the farm, and we hope you will join us for what we hope to be a great year. We have a (not so new) face to introduce to you, and are changing the way we will welcome visitors to the farm. We also have some comments regarding the weather we've been experiencing this winter, and of course lots of new, spectacular plants that we are excited to show you.*

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## ***INSIDE THE WINTER EDITION***

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## A NEW FACE

### Meet Solaris Farms' new Operations Manager, Jordan Kabat

Before I start talking about things happening at the farm, I should introduce myself. My name is Jordan Kabat, and I am excited to say that I am the new operations manager of Solaris Farms. I am not exactly a new face here at the farm, but this is a new role of heightened responsibility, and I am thrilled to be taking it on. I have worked closely with Nate in varied roles over the previous four or five years, doing everything from digging plants to grafting tree peonies. Recently, though, he decided that he needed a more dedicated staff member to lend a hand throughout the year. With my interest in peonies, hybridizing, and plants in general, I think he felt I was a natural fit. I've been gardening in some form over the course of my entire life, and really began to take it on extensively about five years ago. I quickly filled up my own small city yard with plants and then expanded out onto an acre garden that formerly belonged to well-known peony hybridizer Bill Seidl (but that's a whole story of its own... if you're interested, you can read about in the spring '19 issue of the American Peony Society bulletin).

I am a Wisconsin native, was raised on a dairy farm, and always had a vegetable garden growing up, so I think my interest in growing things was certainly fostered at a young age. I remember having a full set of something called "KidsSeeds" that was put out by Northrup King, and being obsessed with growing them. My favorite was a sensitivity plant that was called "Ticklish Tim" because it moved when you touched the leaves. I would always ask my dad to bring home different kinds of seed for me from the farm, too, and on occasion he would, bundling them in little ziplock bags and labeling them for me. I can still remember the smell of the alfalfa seed he gave me.

Later in life, I decided to grow peonies and daylilies after being introduced to them by my mother-in-law, Kris Casey, who has an extensive collection of her own. It also did not help that she in a sort of roundabout way introduced me to Nate... She and her kids helped out in summers at Solaris, so it was only natural that I wound up there. I came to the oriental lilies first. There was one he had growing named "Geisha Girl" in a display bed near the wisteria-covered pergola. It was at least nine feet tall and the most fragrant thing I had ever encountered in a garden. I badly wanted my garden to be full of plants as spectacular as this. Of course, having close ties to the farm was very helpful in this regard, though this marked just the beginning of my obsession. After acquiring a large number of plants, I began to experiment with hybridizing both daylilies and peonies and continue to do so today.

I started small seedling beds that gradually grew larger and larger, and eventually turned over every inch of grass in my yard for flower beds. I wanted to work with Nate to learn as much as possible about the plants I was growing, and about hybridizing them. At the end of the summer of '16, I wanted to quit my degree program to start a new one in horticulture!

*My favorite was a sensitivity plant called "Ticklish Tim", because it moved when you touched the leaves.*

I did, however, go back to school that fall to complete a master's degree in music composition at the Boston Conservatory in Massachusetts, where I had been living since 2013. I knew, though, at graduation, that city life wasn't for me (too much concrete). I moved back home to Wisconsin and luckily found a fit with Solaris. I will say that I am ecstatic to be taking on this role at the farm, and am really looking forward to seeing many of you who decide to visit in the months ahead. Which brings me to the new way we will be welcoming you to the farm this year.





## ***VISITING THE FARM IN 2020***

### **Appointments and Open Houses**

This year, we will be trying out a new system by which you will be able to visit us. It is our hope that it will allow us to devote more individualized attention and better service to all of our customers, while affording us more time to better care for the plants and addressing mail and internet orders. In prior years, customers interested in buying daylilies on site were able to do so beginning in July for a duration of about six weeks. Now, instead of having wide swaths of hours during which we are open to the general public, individuals will be able to schedule private appointments that are convenient for them. During your visit, we can talk to you in a more in depth fashion about your needs, give personalized recommendations, and answer any questions you might have. At the same time, fewer people will be present in the display gardens at any given time, making it easier to view blooms and traverse the often narrow paths. We will still have the same offerings with in-ground Hemerocallis, Lilium, and martagons lilies available, as well as potted varieties of Clematis, cactus, and perhaps a few other oddities. Individual appointments may be made by visiting the appointments page on our brand new website:

**<https://solarisfarms.com/visit-the-farm>**

The first available appointments are on June 24th and run through mid August. Please consult our calendar for availability on specific days and times. Once you decide upon an occasion that works best for you, bookings work much like ordering a plant on the website, though no payment information is collected and you will not be billed (bookings are free of charge).

At the same time, the farm will be open to the general public for a series of open houses that have been strategically scheduled to coincide with specific bloom times. During these open houses, individuals will be able to view plants, though no orders will be taken onsite (the online catalogue will be available as inventory remains), and do note that peonies, as always, are dug and shipped in fall, and will not be available to take home during any open houses or scheduled private appointments.

The first scheduled open house falls over several days from May 27th to June 1st with a focus on early peony bloom. Our second, which highlights main peony bloom, occurs shortly thereafter on just two days: June 5th and 6th. Again, please refer to the calendar regarding specific dates and times for these open houses - they are listed alongside the individual appointments. Also, please feel free to get in touch with us if you have any questions, concerns, or are in need of any special accommodations:

**[info@solarisfarms.com](mailto:info@solarisfarms.com)**

We hope you will stop out to visit us!

Summer Open Houses are being scheduled, during these times visitors will be able to purchase Hemerocallis, Lilium and other plants onsite as in the past. Please see our Calendar at **<https://solarisfarms.com/visit-the-farm/>** and scroll to the months of June, July and August for specific open dates. During these periods you need not notify us of your intentions to visit-show up and enjoy!

***Book your appointment and view  
scheduled open houses at  
[solarisfarms.com/visit-the-farm](https://solarisfarms.com/visit-the-farm)***



# A WET WINTER

Unfavorable weather for peonies, and what to expect in spring



*A Solaris display garden blanketed with snow*

Here in Wisconsin, the last several months have been interesting with regard to weather. With an unprecedented amount of rainfall last year as a whole, and an extremely wet autumn, it seemed as though the saturated ground would never had a chance to dry out before winter set in. The fields at Solaris were so inundated with moisture, we had great difficulty getting the tractor in and around our woody peony grafting beds to get them covered with mulch. Snowfall, then rainfall, then more snow followed the course of fluctuating temperatures through December and January, and we are finding ourselves wondering how the plants will do come spring.

As I write, the last two days have been pleasant with daytime temps in the mid to upper 40's and 30's respectively. Needless to say, I found myself outside poking around and checking on some of my plants. I have a five-year old graft of the woody peony Zephyrus that looked like it was about to send out leaf shoots from its terminal buds. Luckily this means that the stems are by and large all still alive (we often see significant amount of stem die-back here in our northern climate with winter temps historically dipping well below minus 28 degrees before applying the wind-chill factor, though it also means that if we see a sudden drop in temperature again before the weather breaks all of this growth emerging from dormancy will be killed off. I worry that in the two months time before April this will more than likely occur, but we will just have to wait and see. Luckily for plants like Zephyrus (a lutea hybrid), we in Wisconsin often see vigorous growth emerge from the soil each spring, something you might hear referred to as many "basal shoots".

The more concerning factor is always moisture content in the soil when it freezes, though, and we will see what havoc this past fall will have wrought on our plants when the ground thaws. Water and improper drainage in particular around peony crowns is never ideal, as it will not only cause rot and promote the spread of disease, but if water pools around crown tissue just below the surface of the soil, then freezes, it will kill the plant. If these trends continue, and 2020 proves to be a similarly wet year, it will certainly be a difficult year for peonies.

***Snowfall, then rainfall, then more snow followed the course of fluctuating temperatures through December and January***

My garden journals indicate that we experienced blizzards in April the last two years here in Wisconsin, and I recall getting over a foot of snow that came after some of my plants had already emerged from the ground. The tenuifolia that I grow were already five inches tall, and I thought for certain my plants would suffer if I didn't take some sort of precautionary action. I don't know if it was helpful, but I covered everything that was out of the ground with a nice layer of pine boughs - something that would help insulate the shoots, but would be strong enough to hold the weight of the snow and not crush the plant growth underneath. I might recommend this for gardeners who find themselves in the same situation (pay attention to the weather forecasts as spring approaches!) - my method certainly didn't harm anything. Once the snow had melted a bit, I merely removed the branches which allowed the plants to continue growing.



At this point in the season and with what we have experienced, our hemerocallis growers likely need not worry, as dormant type cultivar plants are so tolerant they will emerge next spring with little, if any, issues. For our peony growers, though, I am afraid to say we will be at mother nature's mercy. While many parts of the United States and World are experiencing warmer than normal winter temperatures, Wisconsin has been relatively normal through mid January to February, saving us from the dreaded temperature fluctuations. Early springs are wonderful for our state mind, but not so much for plants. We are hopeful spring arrives at normal time and then progresses evenly for peonies and other plants.

***Our best defense against impending change, however, is attentiveness paired with adaptation.***

Looking ahead, I see snowfall and low temps are on the horizon for Northeastern Wisconsin, and it would seem that this pattern of fluctuation is set to continue for some time. In my opinion, plants will be just fine provided they aren't tricked out of dormancy by an extended warm spell.

Our best defense against impending climate unpredictability, however, is attentiveness paired with adaptation. Noting that our Wisconsin climate has been wetter than usual the last year or two may lead us to prepare for wetter conditions than average in the year to come. Amending our soil for better drainage and prepping runoff trenches for young seedlings are just two things we can do to cope with excess moisture. In my experience my garden journal has been invaluable in allowing me some small amount of foresight with regard to weather patterns that otherwise might seem inscrutable. A journal doesn't necessarily need to be kept in great detail (some might be inclined to note the temperature and condition of each day throughout the year), but I find it sufficient to make notes when extreme temperatures occur (including lows in winter), when storms blow through, and the amount of snowfall and rainfall - particularly if it is a large amount, typically making a note when around six inches or more of precipitation has fallen. A quick jot in the morning of the date and a single sentence are enough. I can't tell you the number of times I refer back from year to year. I'll tell you I wasn't exactly surprised when we had a blizzard last April because we had one about the same week the year before.



*Woody peonies will likely see significant stem die back this year if we continue to see extreme fluctuations in temperature.*

The effects of a shifting climate are being felt across all regions, and in varying manners. While Wisconsin has seen huge, uncharacteristic amount of precipitation, other regions have experienced warmer than average temperatures and drought. Strategizing to care for our own private gardens is one thing, but considering the larger picture is quite another. It may seem trivial for the individual to make small changes in the way we interact with our environment, but they can, in fact, make a difference. Adding trees to the garden, reducing reliance upon gasoline-powered tools, and reducing water consumption are all things we can do in our daily gardening that can help when compounded over time and with other individuals making a similar effort. Watching out for and removing invasive species that may take advantage of harsher climate conditions, and choosing to incorporate native or long lived perennials plants among your specimens are helpful as well.

Just like the weather fluctuations, it is difficult to predict what the future holds for our growing conditions, broadly speaking, in years to come. With a concerted effort, due diligence, and prevailing vigilance, it is my hope that we will be able to avoid the worst we might imagine. It is my hope too, that we will not see shifts so severe that conditions grow inhospitable for some of our favorite garden subjects. Certainly, time will tell, though I hope you will join me in taking care to be a conscious steward of the natural world we are so very lucky to inhabit.



*Pooling water turns to ice in a farm display garden.*

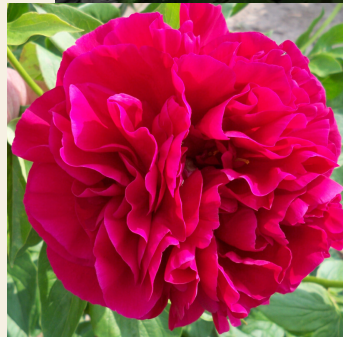


# LATEST INTRODUCTIONS

## Shining a Spotlight on Stellar Specimens

On a lighter note, I am really excited by all the plants that Nate has introduced this year, as I am sure many of you are, too. All of them are superb, and I am anxious to get the ones I don't already have into my garden. A real standout plant is Saharan Sun, a 2020 registration that was originally seedling SH117. A wonderful and warm yellow, it calls to mind the Reath cultivar "Alice in Wonderland" that many of you are probably familiar with. The flower is similar looking in photographs, but an encounter in person will immediately reveal a much fuller, rounder bloom that is altogether more striking in the garden. It has a similar reddish flare, too, that derives from Golden Era (both Alice in Wonderland and Saharan Sun have this cultivar in their lineage, though this one is farther removed). Plants of Saharan Sun are much more floriferous, too, and I am certain anyone who chooses this as a yellow for their garden over some of the older yellow lutea hybrids will not be disappointed.

Another lutea hybrid registration this year is Dakota Girl, a lovely cream-colored flower with a rosey pink or almost strawberry-colored overlay. The flowers this plant produces are enormous, and the plant itself is really vigorous, making it a real standout garden subject. It would seem that fully double flowers are a more popular choice among gardeners, often overlooking plants that produce single, or even semi-double flowers... though this is one that is hard to overlook. The sheer size of the blooms is striking, and the color combination fascinating. We hope that Dakota Girl's namesake, Linette Sorrentino - a peony lover and friend who originally hails from the Dakotas - is proud to have this beautiful bloom carry her honor.



*Top, a specimen of "Saharan Sun",  
at left, a blossom of  
"Cherry Bomb".*



*"Queen of Diamonds" in the field.*

Two herbaceous hybrid peonies I should mention are Queen of Diamonds and Cherry Bomb. Both are exceptional double-red cultivars that have unique traits that make them distinct from each other and other double reds on the market. Cherry Bomb is a true red, and carries itself better than most herbaceous peonies. Queen of Diamonds as you can see in the accompanying photo possesses equally strong stem carriage, but the coloration is slightly more pink in hue. Like many of our readers, I grow the red peonies Old Faithful and the Mackinac Grand in my garden already, though I am really excited to see these two become available as the flowers are denser and more tightly packed with ruffles, and the colors are richer and more vibrant. The plants themselves are surprisingly vigorous, and likely all of these traits are due to their status as advanced generation herbaceous hybrids. These cultivars carry Old Faithful and Mackinac Grand in their heritage respectively, and truly they are stellar offspring of their respective parents.





*Above, two-year-old divisions of Paeonia tenuifolia rosea "Kinlen"*

Paeonia tenuifolia rosea 'Kinlen' is a little pink, single tenuifolia. I love tenuifolia more than any other species peony - in fact, they may very well be my favorite peonies period. Many who grow these, undoubtedly know and/or have the more commonly available reds, rubra or flora plena rubra. The pink variation "rosea" is much less commonly available (particularly in the States), and the cultivar that we do see on the market could be characterized as stubborn and slow growing. 'Kinlen' though, is an excellent grower. I have had one in my garden for three years now, and I am astonished by how large it has grown and by how floriferous it is. The plants in the photo I've included here are just two year old transplants, and you can see how nice they look even in that short amount of time. Of course, you'll want to give them the same advantages you would afford any tenuifolia you add to your garden, i.e. ample drainage and a decent amount of sun. They are really quite at home in a rock garden, so take care to craft this scenario for them if you don't already have such a setup in your landscape. If you have wet loamy or clay soil, just be sure to mix in an amount of sand and gravel to give them a drier footing. You'll be happy with the return on your investment of a little extra time devoted to site preparation if you do - dense clumps of dark green, feathery foliage yielding to beautiful light pink teacups will grace your garden beds for many years to come!

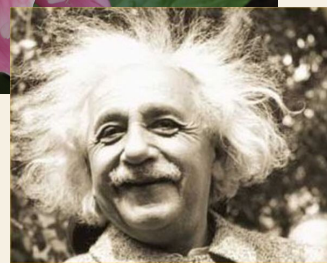
***P. tenuifolia rosea 'Kinlen' origins...Seeds of the normal red P. tenuifolia were ordered from Josef Halda by Lois Kinlen and Jean Halverson (sisters) of Wisconsin in 2001 . After growing the seeds, one presented itself as the pink form of the species. This cultivar was obtained through Lois' and Jean's generous donations to the Wisconsin Peony Society and Minnesota Peony Society auctions over the past 10 years.***

While we're on the subject of pinks, I think anyone with an interest in unique blooms or collecting rarities are definitely going to want to get their hands on the new introduction "Elizabeth Black". This is originally a Bill Seidl cultivar that he had a few different names for, including "Wild William", and "Einstein's Hair"... One might see the logic there, particularly with the latter. In typical Bill fashion, though, he ultimately came up with something completely divergent from the previous path of logic and settled upon the name Elizabeth Black. Purportedly, he did so after seeing a documentary special on the WWII sketch artist of the same name. He was so taken with her story that he felt she deserved to be honored with a peony as unique and special as she was. The flowers of Elizabeth Black are huge, and bear a distinct light coloration on the ends of her twisting petals. They sit upon thick and sturdy stems and pop against a beautiful backdrop of deep-green foliage.

Its namesake was a sketch artist who toured the World War II European theater, drawing troop portraits along the way. Bill was military man, himself, and though he didn't have a direct connection with Miss Black herself, he felt a fondness for her and her efforts.



*"Elizabeth Black" could have been registered as "Einstein's Hair", and one can see why...*



Upon the release of this newsletter, unfortunately we have sold out our stock for this year of Elizabeth Black, but make sure to be attentive in years to come, because you will definitely want to get this amazing cultivar into your garden in years to come.





*Above, "Calliope" in the field, at left, "Calliope" blossom.*

I do want to mention another stellar pink, Calliope. Next to the tenuifolia we are registering this year, this cultivar may very well be my favorite. I have a preference for the beauty found in simple elegance, and unquestionably this plant exhibits exactly that.

The single flowers are the lovely light pink color that I am fond of, but have an excellent faded white edging that makes them exquisite. Gracefully held aloft stems that rise about three feet from the ground, the blooms sway in the breeze and evoke a ballet. The foliage is deeply green and thick, floriferous with many side buds, and in our experience disease resistant - need I say more?



With all of the great new plants this year, and all of the exciting changes that are happening this year at the farm, we hope that you will be able to come out to visit us this season as the weather warms. Keep and eye on our (new!) website for updates, blogposts, and potentially new products, and as always, be in touch with us - we love hearing from you! From all of us at Solaris Farms, happy gardening in the year ahead.

- Jordan Kabat

-Nate Bremer