

## Ron and Marji Illingworth of North Pole Peonies

**L**ike many Alaskans, Ron and Marjorie (Marji) Illingworth came north with the Air Force, and then decided not to leave.

They bought land on Eielson Farm Road, south of North Pole, and began growing vegetables in 1997. In the early 2000s, they became interested in growing peonies commercially, in part, Marji said, because she was tired of squatting down to pick green beans.

North Pole Peonies was one of the first commercial peony farms in Alaska. Today they have about 12,000 peony plants, although they continue to grow some vegetables.

It was a late lifestyle change for the Illingworths, both of whom had already had distinguished careers. Ron, 79, spent 20 years in the Air Force. His last assignment was in Alaska, and the family decided to stay as the oldest of their four children was a senior in high school at the time.

He began teaching at the University of Alaska Fairbanks and ultimately spent 25 years working in rural development and other programs and retired as an English professor emeritus. Marji, 78, also worked at UAF for 20 years, retiring as an associate professor emeritus of developmental education, early childhood and family relations.

Retirement didn't mean slowing down. However, agriculture is physically demanding, and the Illingworths turned to the Alaska AgrAbility program for assistance.

"We've got both indoor and outdoor types of assistance. I'll put it like that," Marji said. "The indoor is stuff that makes it easier to do things in the house so that we can devote more time during the day, specifically during the harvest season, to be outdoors working. That is a 'from 4 o'clock in the morning until midnight-type job' during harvest."

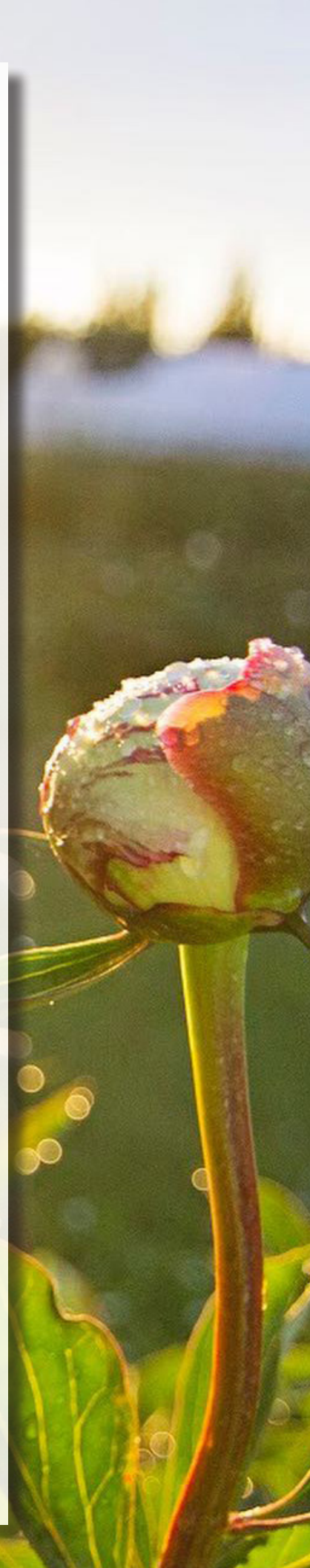
Particularly helpful is a self-propelled "robot" vacuum cleaner, she said. "That time of year, there's not only the two of us tracking things in, we can have 10 to 12 people working here and of course tracking in the grass and dirt. I could either let it get really deep in here or have a full-time job every night trying to clean up after everybody."

Instead, Marji sets the vacuum to sweep once or twice a day while she's out in the field.

"That's not one of the things that you might not think of as helpful in a farming situation, but it really is," she said. "It takes a level of concern and anxiety out because you don't have to worry about taking care of things like that, in addition to everything else you have to do."

They're also looking at a chairlift for the stairs in their home because Ron's knees often hurt.

Another piece of equipment that the Illingworths find helpful is a mobile stool — a seat



mounted on large wheels that they can take into the fields and high tunnels where they also grow vegetables. It relieves the stress of constantly bending and standing while planting and weeding.

The Illingworth have 12 acres planted in peonies that have to be sprayed four or five times a season. From the top of the row to the bottom in the longest row, it's almost a quarter mile, Marji said. "So that's a little more walking than we can do, so we can't hand-spray any more."

They now have a second sprayer and use an ATV to move around the fields. Ron said getting the second sprayer has been a big time-saver. They now have a sprayer dedicated to herbicides and a separate one for fungus and Botrytis control.

"We don't have to be shifting them back and forth and washing them in between applications," Marji said. "We end up alternating applications during the season, so we don't have to lift full tanks and move them around. Moving a 15-gallon sprayer is really tough."

"You don't want to be spraying herbicides on the peonies," Ron added, laughing.

They also are looking at options to replace the ATV.

"When you get to be a certain age, it becomes a little more difficult to get on and off, to operate and load up," Ron said. "So we're looking at a side-by-side, a UTV, which makes is easier and I can cover more rows at the same time and cut the amount of time I have to be out spraying."

It would also have enough room in the back for both tanks, so he wouldn't have to keep lifting them in and out, he said.

"It takes two of us to do the tanks anymore," Marji added.

In addition to ergonomic clippers designed for people with arthritis that lessen the strain of cutting thousands of stems, they've added a few other tools.

One is a commercial bundler, so they no longer have to deal with rubber bands.

They found the bundler on their own, but they've suggested it as a tool that can help other farmers.

"The thing about AgrAbility is their connections with other groups, such as the Farmer Veteran Coalition, with assisted living, and so on," Ron said. "So even if they can't help me directly, they can give me referrals to other places that may be able to provide some assistance."



**Marji and Ron Illingworth have been growing peonies commercially for 18 years.**

— Julie Stricker  
UAF Cooperative Extension Service

