

# Popularity of Dutch Peonies on the Rise

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*Peonies are unprecedentedly popular. The exuberant cut flowers owe this popularity partly to their blooming period around Mother's Day. But the peony is also gaining a growing number of enthusiasts as a perennial garden plant. For both purposes, the West-Friesland region (part of Noord-Holland Province) is the epicenter of cultivation.*



(Photo: John Oud)

In front of the large warehouses of Molenaar Agriculture stands a characteristic stone building from 2015 that recalls classic bulb companies. "Beautiful, isn't it?" says Dennis Molenaar with satisfaction. "Healthy companies always look tidy. That is exactly the image we want to project." This presentation is highly appreciated by many international visitors.

Growers from China, the United States, Canada, and all over Europe come to Hensbroek to purchase propagation material. "We propagate up to 150 varieties, but we are not a breeder," he clarifies. The Noord-Holland-based company also cultivates 35 varieties for cut flowers. This choice was made to offer a broad color palette from early to late varieties, including well-known names such as Coral Sunset, Command Performance, and Sarah Bernhardt. Although peonies are an indispensable part of the flower trade in 2026, large-scale cut flower cultivation is relatively young.



*(Photo: John Oud)*

Dennis and Niels Molenaar were among the first peony growers in 1989; pricing at that time was still mediocre. Today, the Netherlands is the global market leader, with around 1,200 hectares (3,000 acres). Molenaar Agriculture is a major player with 20 hectares (50 acres) in the Netherlands, 14 hectares (35 acres) in France, and 2 hectares (5 acres) in South Africa.

*"Through our locations in France and South Africa, we extend the season. We sell our first peonies in early May, and the harvest continues until July."*

At Molenaar Agriculture, strict quality control takes place to maintain optimal quality. The company's slogan is "Pioniers around the world" (a play on words combining 'peony' and 'pioneers'). That does not come without struggles. Adventures in New Zealand and the United States (Virginia) were discontinued due to logistical challenges, particularly during the corona pandemic. The focus is now on current locations, with the root division propagation taking place entirely in the Netherlands.

The choice of locations is strategic. Dennis Molenaar: "In North Holland, we grow the flowers on heavy clay; there, the plants are more productive, and the flowers are more filled with better color intensity. In North Brabant, we cultivate the propagation material. On sandy soil, it is easier to hoe, and the root divisions grow optimally."



*(Photo: John Oud)*

## Harvesting at the Right Maturity

Quality is the guiding thread. In flower production, workers sometimes walk through the crop daily for up to a week to harvest each flower at precisely the right maturity. In root division cultivation, selection is strict: root divisions with fewer than three eyes are immediately replanted. "Everything is washed before delivery. For export, it is washed twice to ensure it is completely sand-free. A heat treatment against nematodes is the final step before they go into the ground."

The cultivation has its challenges. Peonies need a cold winter for flower initiation, something that is becoming less certain due to climate change. Soil health is also crucial; peonies cannot return to the same plot after a seven-year cycle. Molenaar Agriculture has invested in an LVS (Low Volume Spray) system. This allows for more targeted pest control with significantly less crop protection products. Weed, nematodes, phytophthora, alternaria, and botrytis are the biggest threats.

Dennis Molenaar looks ahead: "We want to operate 'counter-cyclically' and always think three years ahead. Our focus is on being the ideal supplier. Around 60 percent of the flower trade goes directly to buyers, while the rest finds its way through the auction. Our buyers include the high-end market chains that truly focus on quality. But there are also retailers who, despite our higher price, have returned for the superior quality."

### **Company Data: Molenaar Agriculture**

**Location:** Hensbroek, North Holland

**Management:** Dennis (52) and Niels (48) Molenaar

**Acreage:** 20 hectares in the Netherlands, 14 hectares in France, and 2 hectares in South Africa.

**Varieties:** 35 varieties for flowers, 150 varieties for root divisions.

**Strategy:** Fewer stems of higher quality. In addition to peonies, the brothers grow 5 hectares of Allium to spread the workload outside the peony season. A vacant 4,000-square-meter greenhouse on the property may eventually be used for hydrangeas.

## Peonies as Perennial Plants

Breeder Peony Shop Holland is also located in West-Friesland. This company is much less known to most cut flower growers because the Scholten brothers primarily focus on the large-scale breeding of peonies as perennial garden plants. Their customers come from all over the world.

Peonies are loved both as cut flowers and as perennial garden plants. For cut flowers, the market still relies heavily on old varieties, such as Sarah Bernhardt, which was introduced to the market back in 1906. Currently, most new varieties originate from the Netherlands. This is logical, as the country accounts for the majority of global cut flower production. In the garden plant segment, there is a much larger and faster renewal process.



(Photo: Marcel Rob)

Jeremy Scholten: "Our father Theo already grew peonies alongside tulips and irises. After he passed away in 2011, my brother Joshua and I took major steps. For instance, we invested in expensive propagation material from the United States, from which we learned a valuable lesson: where we spent the most, we also earned the most. It is precisely the high cost price of our root divisions that attracts speculators, who hope to profit from them."

The brothers breed in the traditional way, using pollination and sowing seeds. After five years, they can select from their new varieties; this takes place in the greenhouse. After two years of outdoor cultivation, a maximum of ten good varieties remain annually. In 2022, they released three hundred of their own varieties.

The majority of these are sold out every year. Of the nearly ninety varieties for which root divisions were available this year, only four remain for sale. Most varieties are double-flowered and have a luxurious appearance. Early varieties and the colors pink and white are most in demand. Jeremy Scholten: "Buses full

of buyers come from China, the United States, and Europe. All of them are looking for something exclusive for their cultivation or trade. We also have a consumer website."



(Photo: Marcel Rob)

The best varieties are peonies that are vigorous, with many flowers and good rhizome growth for propagation. The varieties are insensitive to botrytis, the flowers are sturdy and resistant to rain, and they preferably fragrance sweetly. Some of these varieties may eventually be used for cut flowers, but that requires many years of propagation beforehand.

### **100 Euros Per Root Division**

Why can't flower growers buy these varieties? Jeremy Scholten: "The first root divisions of our varieties are sold starting from 100 euros per root division. They are therefore much more expensive than root divisions meant for flower cultivation. For a conventional variety, you pay around 2.50 euros per root division. It is a completely different market. Our root divisions go to speculators and enthusiasts who buy just a few. For flower cultivation, you need to plant 18,000 root divisions per hectare."

*"After you plant a root division, you can harvest and divide it after two years. We sell a maximum of 50 percent. This ensures minimal aging of our starting material. We deliver root divisions with three to five eyes and a minimum weight of 250 grams. In this way, we always want to deliver better quality than others. You have to build a good reputation yourself; there is no standard in the peony world. There are not many breeders left; the majority are propagators."*

The global release of their varieties was educational for the Scholten brothers. "Peonies need cold: about four weeks between 2 and 8 degrees Celsius. But if you provide a peony with early warmth, the flowers develop a more beautiful color. You only see the true potential of a variety when it is planted worldwide,"

says the entrepreneur. He prefers root divisions from light clay soil. "They always have a bit more 'mor', which is a West-Friesland regional term for vigor."



*Photo: Marcel Rob)*

**Company Data: Peony Shop Holland**

**Location:** Lutjebroek, North Holland

**Management:** Joshua (48) and Jeremy (54) Scholten

**Status:** New varieties are sold for substantial amounts. Out of hundreds of varieties, root divisions of only four types are currently available for purchase. Scholten also maintains a small acreage for cut flowers.