



Anemone



Ball



Cactus



Collarette



Fimbriated



Formal decorative



Novelty



Single



Waterlily

DAHLIAS

That Gardeners Can Love

With vibrant flowers and striking foliage, the best of these familiar, end-of-season stars belong in every border. Anna Pavord

THERE ARE PLENTY OF PEOPLE who loathe dahlias. “Dahlias!” they say in that tone of voice that implies everybody knows dahlias are beyond the pale. In these circumstances, the best thing is to suggest a visit to Christopher Lloyd’s garden at Great Dixter in Sussex, England, where he uses dahlias with red hot pokers, cannas, phormiums, and bronze castor oil plants to create superb late-summer effects. Or they can find similar inspiration at Wave Hill in the Bronx, New York; in Linda Cochran’s garden on Bainbridge Island, Washington; or in any number of other gardens around the country where dahlias are returning to favor.

Nature, though, never intended the dahlia for gardens with short-ish summers and frost-laden winters. It is a native of Mexico, where it was first described in the late 16th century by a Dr. Francisco Hernandez. He found two species growing in light, sandy soil near the Cuauhnauc mountains and recorded that the tubers were eaten by the local people.

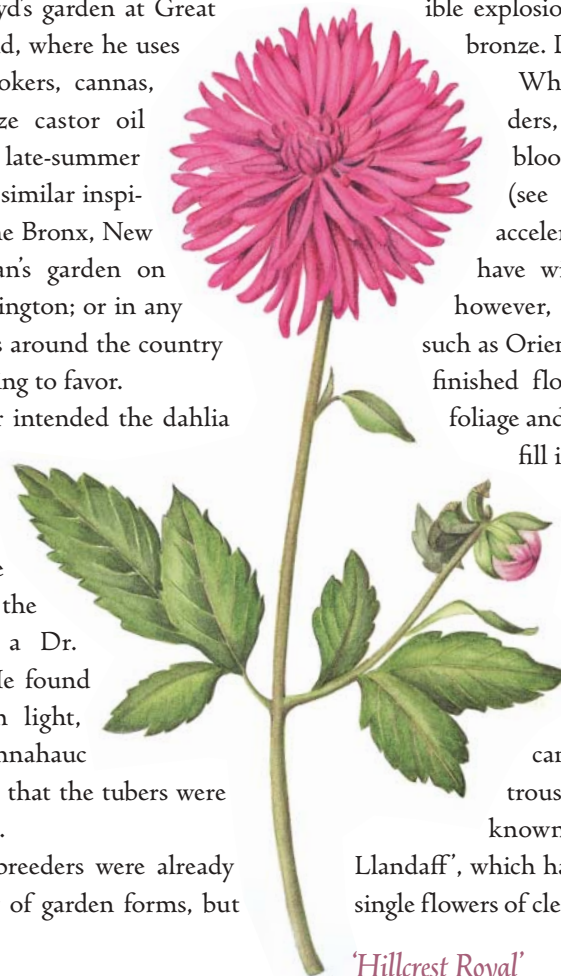
By the 1850s, dahlia breeders were already providing a huge variety of garden forms, but

by the 1930s, the age of rockeries and rhododendrons, dahlias had fallen out of fashion. Fortunately, they are now back, with a vengeance—great whirling suns glowing in late-summer borders, exuberant, irrepressible explosions of yellow, orange, red, purple, bronze. Dahlias don’t do bashful.

When planting dahlias in mixed borders, bear in mind that they come into bloom late, often not before August (see the box on page 27 for tips on accelerating their growth), and that they have wide elbows. They combine well, however, with early-flowering perennials such as Oriental poppies. When the poppy has finished flowering, you can shear away the foliage and leave it to a neighboring dahlia to fill in the gap.

Dahlias, like chrysanthemums, are popular show flowers, and people who grow them for this purpose judge dahlias only by their flowers. A gardener, however, will hope for more than that, and some dahlias can provide it by way of dark, lustrous bronze or purple foliage. The best

known of these types is ‘Bishop of Llandaff’, which has relatively small but well-formed single flowers of clear crimson, superbly set off against



‘Hillcrest Royal’

its dusky foliage. It grows only two and a half feet high. I also grow 'Grenadier', the double version of 'Bishop of Llandaff', which produces a fine flower without the Bishop's distracting yellow eye. 'David Howard' is a similar height, the foliage a soft green-bronze and the plentiful double flowers a warm, rich orange-bronze.

All these dahlias weather well and are prolific with their blooms, provided you keep up with the dead-heading. But not all dark-leaved dahlias are successful. 'Copper Queen', for instance, is too saturated for its own good. Its red flowers are too deep, its coarse foliage too dark; consequently its voice is too muffled ever to be heard in the clamor of a mixed border.

'Bishop of Llandaff' is an old dahlia, introduced in



*'Porcelain'
with 'Black Prince'
snapdragons*

Prolonging the Bloom Season

More than humans, who rely heavily on medical science to keep them going, most plants are eager to complete their annual life cycle as soon as possible. They flower, set seed, and then die, passing quickly on, or in the case of long-lived perennials, shrubs, and trees, taking a rest. Dahlias, peculiarly, spend so much energy producing outrageous bloom that they are apt to cease flowering once they set seed: yet another case in which plant and gardener do not necessarily have the same ends in mind.

Deadheading—the removal of spent flowers—will baffle dahlias into producing more flowers, trying again to achieve their goal of setting seed until frost, the ultimate

deadheader, cuts them down. So, for the longest possible sequence of bloom, remove all spent flowers the minute they become shabby or start to drop their petals. If you are going away for two weeks in the summer, clip out all flowers and immature buds. Take a bouquet to the neighbor.

One word of caution, however: Dahlia flowers are rich in nectar, and bumblebees, drunk with their luxuriance, sometimes slumber within a spent flower. They pass out, as it were, in the local bar. So to avoid the inevitable painful results, use scissors to deadhead, not your fingers. —Ed.



'Bishop of Llandaff'

1928, and its enduring charm lies in its elegant and deeply cut foliage. Use it with exotic *Salvia fulgens* for an eye-stopping display. Mix bronze 'David Howard' with the deep-pink daisy *Argyranthemum* 'Vancouver' or (a safer combination) with crocosmia and yellow coreopsis. Low-growing bedding dahlias such as 'Lilianne Ballego' can be scattered between clumps of canna and *Phormium* 'Sundowner', with mottled silybum added in for contrast. 'Lilianne Ballego' is very free flowering, and the blooms are a gorgeous rusty orange over foliage that is not too heavy. Dark stems increase its allure.

Color is an intensely personal business for a gardener, and at the moment, most of my favorite dahlias are either deep reddish purple or harvest-festival shades of orange and bronze. Bottom of the list are fluorescent yellows and jazzy bicolors. 'Tomo', which has deep-purple petals tipped with white, is spectacularly ugly, but fortunately the bicolors often

Care and Cultivation

You can buy dahlias as tubers, rooted cuttings, or full-grown plants. Tubers are sent out in early spring. Plants raised from cuttings are dispatched between late April and June. Start tubers in pots, setting them four inches deep. Rooted cuttings and sprouted tubers can only be planted out when frost is as distant a memory as chilblains. Dahlias are not fussy about soil, provided it is reasonably drained and well fed. Choose an open situation that gets sun for at least half the day. All plants will need support. A week or so after the first frost has blackened the foliage, cut all stems down to within six inches of the ground. Lift the tubers gently, shake the earth from them, and store them upside down for a week so that any excess water drains from the hollow stems. Then stack the tubers in a single layer in a shallow box and cover them (though not the crowns) with slightly damp compost or sand. Store them in a cool spot where the temperature does not fall below 40F. — A.P.

don't remain stable. They frequently revert to plain, single-colored flowers and look much better for it. 'Smoots' is the kind of dahlia I like. It has the ragged-edge petals that dahlia fanciers call "fimbriated." They give a dahlia the look of an ostrich-plume aster, and this one is rich, deep purple, growing to about three and a half feet. The fabulous 'Hillcrest Royal' is slightly taller than 'Smoot' and has larger flowers, again of richest purple. These are both cactus dahlias, with the rolled, quilled petals typical of their class. They make good garden plants, as do the medium and small decoratives. Leave the giants for showmen. Though they produce footballs of flower, up to 10 inches across, they are difficult to stake and coarse in growth.

I'm also very fond of 'Christopher Taylor', a waterlily type, growing to about four feet. It is much more like a peony than a waterlily, with superb magenta, fully double flowers of a fine rounded shape, the backs of the petals



washed with a silver sheen. It is an unusual dahlia, good with purple-leaved cannas. Among the 35 different types into which dahlias can be divided, 'Comet' is classed as "anemone-flowered," a dark red flower with the petals gathered in decreasing size into the full center. Try it with the flagon hips of *Rosa*

moyesii. 'Porcelain' is a gentler color, a small waterlily dahlia, growing to about five feet. It has an elegant, compact flower, white very subtly shaded with lilac. The darker color looks as though it has been painted on with a fine watercolor brush.

Try it with tall dark snapdragons such as 'Black Prince' or the purple *Atriplex hortensis*. Though frost is anathema to dahlias, in a mild autumn they may bloom

until Thanksgiving. But even if they bloomed for just a month, I'd still want them—bold, brilliant, and brave at the dying end of the gardening year. ♡

'David Howard'

Getting Dahlias to Flower Early

Many American gardeners might be discouraged by the twin facts that dahlias flower so late and, unlike other late-flowering perennials such as chrysanthemums and asters, are felled by the slightest whisper of frost. "Three flowers and you're out" may be the depressing result.

Those gardeners who love dahlias and want to go to the trouble will find it easy to bring them into early flower at home, even without the assistance of a greenhouse. For dahlias flourish uncommonly well under artificial lights, which may be set up in a heated basement, spare room, large closet, or any other frost-free place.

The method works best for dwarf dahlias and those of intermediate height, such as the famous 'Bishop of Llandaff'. Tubers should be potted up in late February, in the smallest pots that will hold them com-

fortably. Use a light, soilless commercial potting medium such as Pro-Mix. Water the pots sparingly until growth tips emerge, and then more freely. The light unit, which may be a fancy commercial model or simple bank of fluorescent bulbs from the hardware store, should be on for 15 hours a day. (A simple timer will keep you honest.)

Apply liquid fertilizer at half strength once a week, and fight insects with organic insecticide soap. Pinch terminal growths frequently for bushy, compact plants. Stop pinching about a month before frosts are safely over in your area. Flower buds should appear within a month, and outdoors, plants should flower from late June until frost cuts them down. —Ed.

Seven Decorative Types

'Café au Lait'
(large flowers with a creamy mocha color; to 36 in.)

'Claudette'
(decorative type; richly saturated double purple-pink flowers; to 16 in.)

'Ellen Houston'
(decorative type; orange-red flowers and purple-black foliage; to 18 in.)

'Kelvin Floodlight'
(giant type, huge clear yellow flowers; to 36 in.)

'Lavender Perfection'
(giant type, orchid-lavender flowers smaller than 'Kelvin Floodlight'; to 36 in.)

'Niigata'
(decorative type; bicolor flowers of carmine-pink, with the petals tipped in white; to 36 in.)

'Zingaro'
(decorative type; flowers reddish purple as they open, turning to a delicate pink and flushed with yellow at their bases; to 24 in.)