

Rainbows On the Ground

*Fall's floral glory
fills Planting Fields*



B9
PART 2

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STAFF WRITER

MUMS AND pumpkins, asters and blazing leaves are the stuff that fall is made of. But there is probably no flower as eager to be recognized as an essential part of the mix as the dahlia, whose brash voice can be heard loud and clear at the Fall Flower and Landscape Show beginning tomorrow at Planting Fields Arboretum State Historic Park in Oyster Bay.

"The dahlia is the mockingbird of the flower kingdom," says Paul Callahan, who manages the Planting Fields dahlia garden, drawing a parallel with the bird's raucous mimicry of other species. "You could mistake its flower for a water lily or an anemone — you really can't tell what it is except by the foliage."

It was the variability of the genus *Dahlia* that first attracted Callahan, a former chiropractor who "got tired of being retired" more than eight years ago and began to volunteer at Planting Fields, where he eventually took a part-time job supervising a crew of volunteers. The group's significant responsibilities include the 5-acre Synoptic Garden, which is an A-to-Z planting of garden-worthy trees and shrubs, and the dahlia garden, a raised-bed area located behind the conservatory.

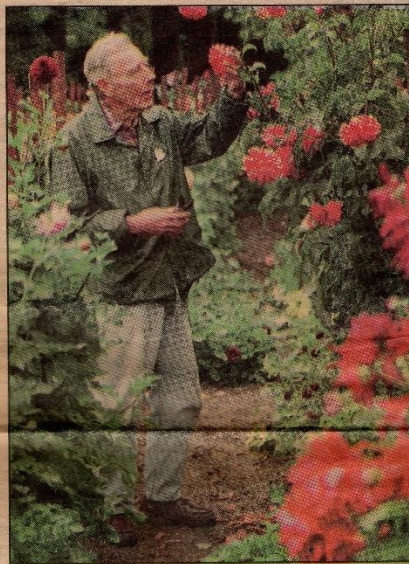
Callahan can be found among his beloved dahlias throughout much of the show, which runs through Columbus Day, Oct. 10, offering such tips as when to plant them (between Memorial Day and the middle of June, "at tomato time," he says), and just how deep he digs an 8-inch hole for each one, filling it halfway with a mixture of a small handful of Electra brand powdered organic fertilizer and a similar amount of lime before the tuber goes in).

The eye, or growing tip, of the tuber should be positioned right next to a stake, he says, and a 2-foot-by-2-inch stake must be pounded in before planting to avoid damaging the tuber. As the plants grow, they are tied to the support.

Another common question he'll be happy to answer: how to store the tender tubers over the winter, for use again the following year. After severe frost blackens the foliage, Callahan cuts the plants back to about 6 inches above ground level. Though many growers dig the tubers at that point, Callahan likes to leave them in the ground as long as possible, to reduce the time in storage.

Before winter sets in, though, he carefully lifts them, washes each clump off and removes the hair roots, but doesn't break up the clumps. He lets them air out a couple of hours so that they're not dripping but not dry, and lays them in cardboard boxes he lines first with paper. The tubers are then surrounded with vermiculite and stored in a cool basement, where he checks them periodically for rot ("it means they're too cold," he says) or shriveling ("they're too warm, and need misting").

The kaleidoscopic Planting Fields dahlia garden,



Newsday Photos: David L. Pokras

Dahlias — 250 varieties tended by volunteers headed by Paul Callahan, above — are center stage at Planting Fields Arboretum's fall show in Oyster Bay.

which includes a staggering 250 distinct varieties, is a favorite attraction of the fall show, the largest garden event of the year on the island. It is actually many shows: a competitive event by the Mid-Island Dahlia Society this weekend, along with a fine arts show and sale, followed next weekend by the Long Island Chrysanthemum Society's annual event, plus an arts and crafts fair.

Leading local landscapers have set up scaled-down display gardens under a giant tent, and the Hay Barn building is packed with flower arrangements and informative amateur plant-society booths, with a plant sale area just outside. The conservatory is decorated with mums; Coe Hall, the old estate house, will be

open for tours. There is more than horticulture, too — pony rides and pumpkins for sale, magicians and storytelling for children, food and other festivities.

There is also the chance to simply walk around the grounds of Planting Fields, the former Coe family property that was given to the state in 1949. The 409-acre site boasts an outstanding collection of trees and other plants, many of which are beginning to color up for fall or are laden with bright berries at the moment.

All of it should be looking picture-perfect at show time, but not by accident. It takes well-planned efforts to keep the 100 acres of lawn perfectly cut and the thousands of trees and shrubs well-pruned and healthy — a real challenge in recent budget-tightening years when staffing has lagged far below optimal levels.

That's where groups like Callahan's team, which has become the role model for other volunteer efforts at Planting Fields, come in. In the Synoptic Garden alone, Callahan figures they have managed to plant 10,000-12,000 bulbs the last several years, for example — work that simply wouldn't have been done without them. Neither would the weeding, mulching of pathways, pruning and other maintenance that make the difference between keeping the Synoptic Garden a highlight of a visit to Planting Fields or allowing it to become a mere memory, sadly overgrown.

No wonder, then, that the volunteers who help Callahan in his weekday morning rounds talk about Planting Fields with a sense of pride that approaches stewardship, if not ownership — perhaps the best way one can feel about a public garden.

"Coe started it, the state owns it, but it's our garden," Callahan says with a smile. ■

FLOWER SHOW DETAILS

Planting Fields Arboretum's 90th annual Fall Flower and Landscape Show runs tomorrow through Oct. 10 from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily. Free gardening lectures include radio garden personality Ralph Snodsmith on Monday at 11 a.m. and 1:30 p.m. and Newsday garden editor Margaret Roach at 10:30 a.m. and 1:30 p.m. on Wednesday. Admission to the show is \$6 weekends, \$5 weekdays; most other events are free, other than a weekend wildlife show for children put on by the Theodore Roosevelt Sanctuary, and the pony rides. Planting Fields is located on Planting Fields Road in Oyster Bay. Call (516) 922-9206 for details. ■

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