

GARDENS



Newsday Photos / K. Wiles Stable

Bill Allgeier, director of the Eastern Trial Garden of the American Dahlia Society — a patch of land in Eisenhower Park — works with a few specimens. At right, up close and personal.

IN A HISTORIC SENSE, you could trace Bill Allgeier's roots back to Montezuma. His dahlia roots that is.

"Some people have said that I'm dotty for dahlias," said Bill, president of the Mid-Island Dahlia Society, who has 120 dahlias growing along the side of his house in Hicksville.

None of Bill's ancestors were Aztecs, but his flower fetish is firmly rooted in the ancient Mexican civilization. When the Spanish *conquistadores* invaded the empire in 1519, Montezuma's palaces were surrounded by dahlia gardens and his nobles wore dahlia symbols on their helmets and shields. Aztec poetry compares the dahlia's scarlet petals falling in the morning breeze to drops of blood shed by warriors in battle. And dahlia blooms were sprinkled over victims sacrificed to the sun.

Today, the American Dahlia Society recognizes 17 dahlia classifications, based mostly on the form of the flowers. Dahlias that look like daisies and water lilies and anemones and peonies and orchids and cacti. Flowers can be big blowy stars more than a foot across or petite ingenues less than two inches in diameter. Plants themselves can be six-inch dwarfs or 10-foot giants. And then there are the colors, 15 different categories of colors and blends of colors. Red, yellow, purple, pink, bronze, lavender — every shade under the sun except black and blue — that appear in late June and linger through autumn until frost.

Bill's in the garden through the season — putting his time and energy into the care and cultivation of the show-stopping blooms. His obsession began more than 30 years ago when his wife Mary Lou came home with a package of dahlia tubers. Bill had never really gardened before, but he put the tubers in the ground and waited. When the flowers blossomed he couldn't believe his eyes.

"It was like magic. I was stunned at how big they were — and how gorgeous. I was thrilled that I could grow something like that."

The following season he planted a half-dozen more dahlias — this time named varieties — and when he saw an ad for a dahlia show with a novice category, he cut a dark red bloom called Juanita and entered. His dahlia won second place, and Bill Allgeier was on his way down the garden path.

Bill's sparklers grow in raised beds in a 10-by-70-foot border — all of it irrigated by his own watering system, which includes tiny plastic spigots that send jets of water in low arcs across the bed. He protects his darling dahlias as if they were daughters. He grows them under tobacco cloth attached to 11-foot-high poles to keep off beetles and borers and to filter the sunlight so the giant beauties have to stretch even higher for the sun. When rain threatens, Bill brings out umbrellas and tapes them to the wooden stakes that support the tall hollow stalks. "I put up ten, fifteen umbrellas. It's quite a sight."

Bill doesn't dillydally with his dahlias. When he isn't running his electronics sales

Dotty for Dahlias

firm, he's likely to be out there with his plants. He's introduced three new varieties to the American Dahlia Society — a big yellow cactus dahlia, named Mary Lou after his wife, and others named after two grandchildren, Katlin and Christopher. He grows jewels like Long Island Lil and Irene's Pride and Miss America. And of course Juanita — as well as a child of Juanita's named Nita. Bill wins ribbons in dahlia shows all over the East Coast. "Juanita still wins big for me," he said.

On Long Island every plant from azaleas to zinnias seems to have its own fan club, and dahlias are no exception. The Mid-Island Dahlia Society, which has 300 members, is one of the largest dahlia societies in the country. Besides working in his own yard, Bill keeps tabs on the group's display garden and on the Eastern Trial Garden of the American Dahlia Society,

which dazzle alongside each other in a little patch of land behind the Administration Building in Eisenhower Park. He's director of the trial garden, where growers from all over the world send dahlia tubers to be evaluated.



Irene Virag

Throughout the summer and fall Bill and other dahlia diehards come to the trial garden on Sunday mornings with tape measures and scoring sheets. They measure the length of stems and the depth and diameter of blooms and examine foliage for firmness and thickness and smoothness. They compare the shade of petals against a color chart and note the plant's susceptibility to mildew and insects. And they're always on the lookout for the perfect 45-degree angle of the bloom. "You want that dahlia to look right at the judge," Bill said.

The reasons for Bill's enthusiasm were plain on a recent morning despite a persistent drizzle. At a time of year when most gardens snooze, the trial garden was wide awake. That's the wonder of dahlias — they're the Energizer bunnies of the garden, they keep going and going — until that sad day when the first hard frost turns them black and they stop dead in their tracks.

Bill stood in front of a red and white beauty from Holland, shaking his head. "We failed this one," he said. "No depth, which means the ruffles are shallow. And it's got crochety blooms, which means the flowers sit low in the foliage. You need proportion between the bloom and the stem. The stem should be at least one and a half times the size of the bloom, so if you have an eight-inch bloom, the stem should be twelve inches."

He stopped to admire a red nine-inch blossom called Shrimp Louie from Tacoma, Wash. "Shrimp Louie is an A-size dahlia — from eight to ten inches in diameter. It scored well, an 86. Passing is 85. If a dahlia scores 86, 87, it's excellent. Over 87 — that's WOW. Growers compete for medals in trial gardens around the world. If a dahlia performs well, the grower can advertise the score in his catalog and get twenty, twenty-five dollars for one root the year it's introduced on the market. Most dahlias run about ten or fifteen dollars."

The knockout dahlias in the trial garden this season were Mingus Kyle D from Vancouver, Wash. — a BB formal decorative red, in dahlia-speak — and Riisa, a two-inch mini-ball from Tacoma that scored a whopping 88.38. "These are near-perfect dahlias," he said.

Bill Allgeier's obsession was showing. "It's so simple to get hooked, and oh boy am I hooked. I have a few mums in my yard, a few begonias and impatiens, some vegetables, but mostly it's dahlias. What can I say? I don't really care about other flowers. I'm dotty for dahlias."

Dig 'em Up After Autumn's Frost

IF THERE'S A DOWNSIDE to dahlias, it's digging them up every autumn. Most growers wait till the first hard frost blackens the blooms. Bill Allgeier says it's okay to dig them out before then as long as they've had 150 days of growing. But don't wait any longer than one week after the frost.

Some growers wax their dahlia tubers with paraffin before storing them. Even Bill doesn't go that far. And he waits until spring to divide the root clumps. Here are his tips for digging and storing:

Cut tops off the plants to within 12 inches of the ground and label each tuber. Don't put stalks in the compost, because slugs and borers may lurk in the stems.

Dig around each clump, about a foot from the plant. Gently pry out the root mass. Don't lift by the stalk. Shake off excess soil and hose clumps. Dry them in a frost-free area for half a day, then cut stems to about two inches.

Pack tubers upside down in cardboard boxes filled with shredded newspaper, vermiculite or perlite. Pack tightly. Don't use peat moss; it pulls water from roots. Cover with sheets of newspaper and close box, leaving hand holes at each end for ventilation.

Store in a cool place between 35 and 50 degrees — 45 is ideal. If it's too cold, tubers turn to mush. If it's too hot, they dry up.

When tubers are stored, fork corapost into dahlia beds. —Virag