

In recent months, we have not seen much of one of our long-time members, Jay Hexham. For health reasons, he has been, for the most part, confined to his home. But he was an active member in all MIDS activities; the following profile highlights just one of his dahlia pursuits. This article was originally published in the Mid Island Dahlia Society Newsletter in June 2011.

Jay Hexham, MIDS Propagation Chairman

MIDS members who were at the May 2011 meeting must have been impressed by the wide variety of dahlias for sale. A major contributor to this display of greenery was Jay Hexham, MIDS Propagation Chairman. In this role, his job was to provide tubers and cuttings for our May and June root sales. Piece of cake, right? No – it involved a LOT of time, dedication, and hard work.

Early in November 2010, after MIDS volunteers dug up the 275 tubers from the display garden in Eisenhower Park, the clumps were piled high in the back of Doris and Jay's "dahlia van" and transported to their home. Then the wheelbarrow brigade began, with load after load of tubers wheeled from the driveway around to the greenhouse in the Hexham's back yard.

As point man in the greenhouse, Jay supervised the unloading and arranging of the tubers on benches until the walls began to bulge and threatened to displace his TV and telephone! His next task was to brush the excess dirt off the clumps then leave them to cure for at least a week. At the same time, he was also working on the 180 dahlias from his own garden! After the tubers were cured, Jay packed the clumps in Styrofoam containers for their "long winter's nap."

Fast-forward to the first week in March 2011. Jay woke up the slumbering tubers by returning them to the greenhouse and cranking up the heat. Then he proceeded to bench them in trays after labeling and splitting the clumps. By around the third week in March, Jay started making cuttings, dipping the stems in rooting medium and placing them in 4" pots. At about this time, Jay's dahlia inventory expanded to include tubers dropped off by MIDS members who generously donated their extras to the club. Whew! Jay's production routine was now in high gear!

A mix of tubers and cuttings made up the 300 to 400 dahlias that Jay transported to the May sale. He also brought a bonus: more than 80 dahlias in 5" pots donated by the MIDS Planting Fields crew.

Thanks, Jay, for all your hard work. You are a dahlia propagator, *par excellence!*

By Suzanne Leander



Devotees of the flower gear up for their grower and show-er Olympics this weekend at Planting Fields

IF A YELLOW BRICK ROAD had suddenly materialized in Doris and Jay Hexham's backyard the other day, I wouldn't have been surprised. You're not in Hicksville anymore, I thought, looking down at my feet for ruby slippers.

Of course, I really was in Hicksville — at the 60-by-100-foot property of a white Levitt house on a tidy street of green lawns and clipped evergreens and borders of bright impatiens. But in my imagination I was somewhere over the rainbow.

Magical flowers in every color except blue crowded around me. Some looked like water lilies and others looked like orchids. Some resembled daisies and still others could pass for peonies. Some were as big as soccer balls; others were as small as golf balls. They could



Mid Island Dahlia Society members, below, prepare Planting Fields Arboretum gardens for the national show

I was gaping at 215 dahlia plants. Which translates into nearly a thousand blooms.

These were no ordinary garden-variety dahlias. These were show dahlias. By their very appearance, dahlias are the divas of the fall garden. Show dahlias are superdivas. Each one of the Hexhams' plants was bred for the big time. Each was meticulously staked, sprayed, pruned and otherwise pampered. Each was weeded and watered and protected from the elements. Most of them — from bright pink Alloway Candy to blood-red Zorro — were shaded by a sea of umbrellas attached to tall wooden stakes beneath a canopy of black netting. Harsh sunlight can fade the show-bound flowers, while rain and dew can stain or oth-



Newsday Photos / Ken Spencer

"Every which way you look, there's a dahlia," Jay said. "What can we say, they just took over."

Indeed, they did. Dahlias here, dahlias there, dahlias everywhere. Not only do they dominate the yard, but the flowers and their accompanying paraphernalia fill three sheds and a greenhouse. Plus an air-conditioned room where cut dahlias are stored in their travel containers the night before a show. The travel arrangements are just one example of the passion — make that the obsession — of gardeners who grow dahlias for competition. Each cut flower is cleaned with a wet Q-tip, and the stem is wedged in a water-filled section of PVC pipe secured inside a plastic milk crate. There are six stems to a crate. For a recent weekend show in Rhode Island,



Irene Virag

Doris and Jay got up at 4 a.m. Saturday to load their 1984 Chevy van with 80 blooms. Then they jack up the air-conditioning.

"We bundle up in the car," Doris said.

Jay smiled. "There are growers and then there are show-ers."

What you have to know is that Doris and Jay belong to what may be Long Island's most dedicated band of gardeners. There are people

whose yards and lives are rife with rhododendrons. There are tillers of the suburban soil whose front lawns and hopes and dreams are reserved for roses. There are enthusiasts whose beds, borders and aspirations are devoted to daylilies. But few of them approach the pure passion of dahlia diehards. This is no mere dalliance. In a normal season, Doris and Jay are dattu

Doris and Jay Hexham of Hicksville amid the dahlias they raise for shows.

DAHLIA DIEHARDS

DAHLIA from B8

weekend at Planting Fields Arboretum in Oyster Bay. Thousands of fans are expected to ooh and aah over more than 2,000 blooms that have been painstakingly preened and carefully cut to wow crowds and win awards.

If you're a grower, this is great. If you're a show-er, this is dahlia-mania.

By the time the gates open to the public Saturday afternoon, at least 70 accredited judges will have scored the flowers on everything from form and foliage to color and contour and size and substance. Hundreds of ribbons and 11 major awards will be presented. The best of the best blooms get royal treatment. There will be a king and queen, a prince and princess, and even a duke and duchess. Local, state and regional shows draw enthusiasts throughout the season, but the annual national competition is the big bloomerama. Devotees — many of them with flowers in their vans — are expected to come from 30 states as well as Canada, and fanciers are hoping to fly in from New Zealand.

"It's the Olympics of dahlia growers," said Steve Nowotarski of Massapequa, co-chair of the event and a past president of the host Mid Island Dahlia Society. "Anybody who says they don't care if they have a winner or not is lying. This is nerve-wracking, serious business. It's an addiction for the exhibitor."

Mid Island — whose almost 300 dahlia addicts include Doris and Jay — is the nation's largest local group. Long Islanders take their dahlias seriously. They're spiritual descendants of Montezuma, who surrounded his gardens with dahlias. He didn't have T-shirts and gimme caps to give out, but his nobles wore dahlia symbols on their helmets and shields. The Spanish conquistadors found the flowers in Mexico in the early 1500s, and the rest of the world has enjoyed them ever since.

I'm not the only one who thinks of dahlias in Oz-ian terms. In describing the arrangements for the show, Steve mentioned that reflector signs are being set up along Mill River Road in Oyster Bay to direct out-of-town exhibitors to Planting Fields. "It'll be like following the yellow brick road," he said.

The Mid Islanders picked Planting Fields as the showplace soon after getting the national society's nod three years ago. If any place looks like an Emerald City park, it's the arboretum, with its rolling lawns and majestic trees and lush greenhouses and verdant gardens that include a 17-bed dahlia display.

Volunteers work among the arboretum's dahlias every week, but this year — with visitors scheduled to come from all over for the show — the effort is extra. That's also the case at the eastern trial garden in Eisenhower Park in East Meadow, where dahlia breeders from around the world send hundreds of newly developed dahlias to be evaluated. Incidentally, the trial garden is under the supervision of Bill Allgeier of Hicksville, who is the other co-chair of the show. He's a three-time president of Mid Island, and he'll receive a Gold Medal of Achievement from the American Dahlia Society at the awards banquet Saturday night. To give you an example of his dedication, Bill spent his birthday at the Eisenhower Park garden several days ago, mowing and weed-whacking. Last year at the nationals in Washington, D.C., he won the award as the best small grower. "I only have 150 dahlias," he explained.

I checked out the fine-tuning at Planting Fields last week, where volunteers were busy in and out of the field. It was a perfect day for people and dahlias — blue skies, not a trace of summer's heat and humidity, no wind. Outside the Burns Horticultural Center, where the exhibition will be staged, about 30 dahlia groupies were up to their elbows in barrels of soapy water washing almost 1,000 green plastic vases that will be used to display the blooms. Just days before, a fire broke out in the center's kitchen and the vases were covered with white residue from fire extinguishers. "Nothing like a little fire two weeks before a national show to calm your nerves," said Steve.

In the garden, volunteers water and fertilized and deadheaded and dibbled — the all-important practice of pinching off small side buds so the plant puts its energy into fewer but larger flowers. Bill Wolkoff of Brightwaters sprayed organic liquid fertilizer in the center bed of white dahlias named Magic Moment — which Mid Island members picked as the show's signature bloom. Doris Aldridge of Westbury deadheaded a small, dark-red flower called Hy Tabu. Ron Tarpinian of Malverne snipped a delicate-looking bloom called Grace McNulty from a

bed of dahlias classified as AOT, or Any Other Type.

"I've found that women seem to favor the smaller blooms," Ron said, "while men like the giant flowers. I'm sure there's some greater meaning in that, but I won't be the one to say what that is."

Steve handed me a dark-red bloom. "That's Zorro," he said. "A small Zorro. It's only 8 inches."

Traditionally, when the subject is show dahlias, size is, well, big. In fact, one of the major awards at any competition is "largest-in-show." Dahlias in that category have to be more than 10 inches in diameter and are commonly referred to as "dinner plate" dahlias, which Steve says is a misnomer. "Dinner plates are shallow — a good dahlia has to have depth — think of a giant, globular brandy snifter."

Or as Bill Allgeier says, "Size matters."

This may be something of a male view. Actually, dahlias are famous for their diversity. As I said, they come in all sizes and shapes and all but one color. There are no blue dahlias. "If somebody came up with a blue dahlia, they'd make a million dollars," Doris Hexham told me.

Doris has almost every other classification of dahlia staked out in her floral version of lollipop land — or, to be more accurate, Tootsie-Pop land. She went to a show on a whim more than 20 years ago, and "it was love at first sight. I came home and announced, 'I'll



Newsday Photo / Ken Spencer

Doris Hexham and a blossom of Irene's Pride

need some space in the garden next spring to plant dahlias."

Jay, who retired five years ago, had tended the grounds at Belmont Raceway for almost 30 years, working his way up from garden foreman to general foreman in charge of 463 acres, including 65 acres of turf and seven greenhouses. In his time, he's planted millions of bulbs, started thousands of chrysanthemums from seed and maintained miles of borders brimming with

delphiniums and columbines and other old-fashioned flowers. But dahlias? "Never grew any dahlias," he said.

All that changed when Doris took over a tiny corner of the backyard.

"I stuck her way in the back," he says. "I had 15 tomato plants—I needed the space." That was then. If Jay didn't point out the lonely cherry tomato plant growing in a pot under the apple tree, I wouldn't have noticed. "It's funny how the vegetable bed got smaller every spring."

Their friends and competitors — they're synonymous, Doris assures me — would agree that the Hexhams exemplify the pride and the passion that lead to the exhibitor's court of honor. At first, Doris was both the grower and the show-er. Jay helped with transport and setting up for shows. Then he'd play golf. Now he's in as deep as his wife. Each spring they dig more than 200 holes and pound in that many stakes.

"We plant in one weekend," Doris said, "and then I go to the chiropractor."

"The neighbors ask, 'What are you doing back there,'" Jay said, "growing umbrellas?"

"We take umbrella donations," Doris said.

Most mornings, Jay is in the garden by 5:30 to water the plants. He snips back lateral shoots and disbuds with a tool he fashioned by gluing the top of a pen to a pencil. As the plants grow taller, Doris ties them to the stakes to pro-

tect them from wind damage. The dahlias are sprayed and fertilized and constantly monitored for spider mites, earwigs and slugs. If a flower's face is pointing straight up — a condition known as "tippy" in dahliaspeak — Jay and Doris train it so that the bloom grows at a 45-degree angle and will be looking right at the judges when it gets to the table. And whenever the Hexhams cut off a flower, they dab putty on the hollow stem of the plant to keep out borers and even rain, both of which could prove fatal.

On the day I visited the Hexhams, everything seemed to be working like magic. I grow dahlias, but not like that. Doris and Jay are wizards. I was enchanted by giant purple Rev. P. Holian, white Brookside Snowball, dark-red Juanita, pink Alloway Candy, bronze Irene's Pride, orange Poppet, lavender Light Music, yellow Harmari Sunshine and lots more.

Jay beamed as he pointed out his favorites. Doris, a tiny, red-haired woman, was beaming too, but she was almost lost among the taller plants and bigger blooms. "We're hoping to take 100 flowers to the nationals," she said. "We have high hopes."

I felt like skipping down the rows. For a second I thought I heard munchkins singing.

This weekend, I think I'll follow the yellow brick road to Planting Fields. ■