

## DAHLIA GARDEN AT EAST MEADOW FARM

### LATE WINTER/EARLY SPRING



Photo taken by Suzie Alvey

It's time to bring the Dahlia tubers out of Winter Storage. The tubers must be cut apart and separated so that they can be shared. Members of the Mid Island Dahlia Society share their tubers with the Dahlia Garden at CCE-NC. They also supply tubers to their

experimental gardens at Eisenhower Park and to the Planting Fields Dahlia Garden.

Our members painstakingly select tubers to plant to provide a varied display. Small and Large Blooms, Water Lily style blooms, Mum shaped blooms, Dinner plate blooms in all hues of nature, white to deep burgundy, with punches of yellow, peach, pink and multicolor blossoms. These tubers are planted indoors in a greenhouse until the earth is soft and pliable for planting. It is important to keep the tubers labeled with their names by writing directly on the tuber or by a label attached to the tuber.

In preparation for planting, carefully our garden is laid out and staked for Spring Planting. We use 6' tall heavy-duty stakes to

secure our plants for support through rain, wind, and heavy growth. When the ground is ready, we plant the tubers about six inches down with the growth end of the tuber directed slightly up (at this point the tuber has already started to put out a shoot which should be above ground or as close to the top of the soil as possible). The tubers must also be planted as close to the stake as possible to aid in keeping the plant supported properly.

We use a combination of wood ash, compost, vermiculite or perlite and fertilizer in the hole before planting. Watering regularly is important as the plants establish themselves. Soon the sun, water, soil amendments and fertilizer combine to generate rapid growth of the lush, green leaves of the Dahlia Plant.

We lay out the garden by size and type of bloom. Dahlias are categorized by size starting with AA and ending with small border plants. We label each of our plants by size, name, and usually color. Visitors to the Dahlia garden can read the labels and order tubers from many growers if they would like to replicate any of our plants. We also try to include a few new varieties each season to learn more about new Dahlia plants from established and new growers. When the Dahlias have 3 sets of leaves on them we take off the top of the plant (this is called topping). This then causes side shoots to form giving us a bushier plant. This can also be done to the side shoots.

### SUMMER

Now the Dahlia Gardener needs patience as Dahlias need several months to put out their peak display. May, June and part of July find Dahlia growers watering, fertilizing and



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caring for the plants as they grow and spread waiting for their bloom. A key aspect of care at this point is supporting the rapid growth of the plant. We tie up the branches each week and secure them to the stakes. Twine or string work perfectly for this task. Sometimes

we tie one or two of the heavier branches up to the stake and other times we circle the plant with the twine or string and tie it in a circle, which supports the plant and keeps it a manageable size. It is interesting to see at this point the variety of leaf shape, leaf color and growth habit of the individual plants.

During this time, it is imperative to get the best blooms to grow on the plants by taking out the small beginnings of a flower on either side of a main bloom to promote larger,



healthier growth on the main stem. We use small tools to pick off and cut out the tiny blossom origin. Most blooms come in threes; we leave the central bloom and cut out the two small blooms on either side. In addition at this time, the Dahlia Gardener must clear out any low growth that inhibits air from circulating at the base of the plant.

#### LATE SUMMER

Late Summer is the reward for all of the preparation and special care of the Dahlia plants. The most prolific bloom is August into September and even early October. The plants are full, tall, with a profusion of blooms. If we have done a good job with the plants we should have Blooms on long stems. And not only are we and our guests pleased with the results, but the bees are happy, too!

#### EARLY FALL

Early Fall starts to see a decline in blooms. It is time to cut back the plants. And to double check the labels and insure that they are tied firmly to the remaining stalks. After a week or two, we dig up the tubers and pack them in containers with shredded paper and place them in a cool location. Now the tubers can winter over and gather strength for next year's bloom.

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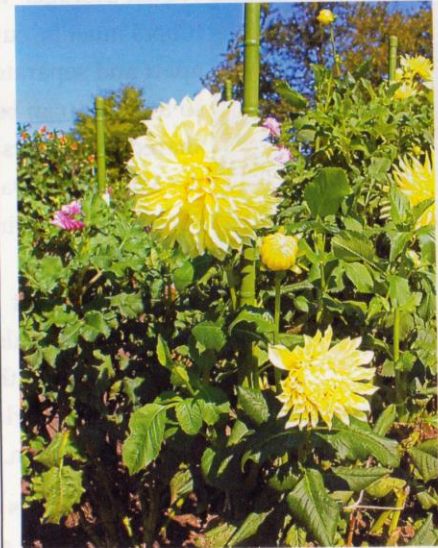


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