

Kathy Burke

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hello, dahlia

THE FLOWERS ARE LOOKIN' SWELL AS THE ANNUAL COMPETITIONS BEGIN **B2**

Devoted to dahlias

Growers put their mettle to the petals as annual flower competitions loom

BY LISA IRIZARRY
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Twelve umbrellas went up in the backyard of Lenny Nicolosi's house earlier this month, but it wasn't because of rain.

The 70-year-old Bay Shore resident was preparing for yet another series of annual dahlia competitions by trying to coax his planned entries into becoming viable contenders. He has nearly 400 dahlias in his garden.

Nicolosi was worried about the colors fading, the flowers drying out or showing water spots, beetles descending on the plants to eat the leaves, and the proper symmetry being achieved between the head of the flower and the stem.

"You put up the umbrellas so there are deeper colors to the flowers and they protect them from beetles because the beetles bounce off them." He adds: "The first show is a week from Saturday in Connecticut — me and my wife are together in this. We went to seven dahlia shows last year and won 44 top awards."

DAHLIA COMPETITION

Nicolosi belongs to the Long Island Dahlia Society, and he's one of many growers and enthusiasts anxiously getting ready for this year's Long Island dahlia competitions to begin.

First-, second- and third-prize ribbons are awarded for excellence in such categories as the size and shape of the blooms. Various money prizes are also given to top winners.

The competition is fierce, says Mike Shukofsky, an Elmont resident who runs a trial garden in Eisenhower Park for the American Dahlia Society. He's a member of the Mid Island Dahlia Society that maintains the trial garden where dahlias are grown and evaluated in categories such as color, shape, form and durability.

"Really fanatical people tend to put umbrellas on them when they're getting ready for blooms," says Shukofsky, 75. "The sun tends to cut and fade the brilliance of the flower and the umbrellas also catch the dew so there's no moisture for a better shape in the back."

Another Mid Island member, Jay



DANIELLE SILVERMAN



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Kathy Burke of Northport has 152 dahlias in her garden, including these.



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ABOVE AND ON THE COVER

Kathy Burke displays some of the myriad varieties of dahlias at her Northport home. There are 42 recognized species and several subspecies.

Hexham of Hicksville, says his wife, Doris, is fanatical about their dahlias and taking care of them, and she lives for this time of year.

"This lady is a competitor, she doesn't like to lose — she can get 14 or 15 ribbons in one show," Hexham says of his wife. "I was a vegetable grower and she got me into this. Now I ask her, 'Why didn't you take up a hobby like crocheting or knitting?'"

It's a lot of work tending to dahlias so they'll shine in the shows, Jay Hexham and others say, but there's something about dahlias that get you hooked once you're introduced to the flower.

"The vegetable garden went good-bye in 1990 or '91 and the dahlia garden got bigger and bigger — at its height there were 220 dahlias," Jay Hexham, 81, says.

Doris Hexham, 80, says her love

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**LONG ISLAND DAHLIA SOCIETY
FIRST DAHLIA SHOW**

WHEN | WHERE

1-5 p.m. Saturday and
10 a.m.-4 p.m. Sunday,
Bayard Cutting Arboretum,
Lower Carriage House,
440 Montauk Hwy.,
Great River

INFO Free; longislanddahlia.org

**MID ISLAND DAHLIA SOCIETY
DAHLIA SHOW**

WHEN | WHERE 1-5 p.m. Sept. 15
and noon-4 p.m. Sept. 16,
Planting Fields Arboretum,
Burns Horticultural Center,
1395 Planting Fields Rd.,
Oyster Bay

INFO Free; midislanddahlia.org

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affair with dahlias began in the 1960s when she saw a dahlia show in Franklin Square. "The colors were magnificent," she recalls.

Before she knew it, she was traveling to the shows alone and with her husband to places like New Jersey, Connecticut, Washington, Rhode Island and California, and as a couple they were competing. "I said we have to be serious to show," Doris Hexham says. And she's very serious. For competitions she wears a belt made from some of the hundreds of ribbons she's been awarded.

A QUEST FOR RIBBONS

"She'd die if she didn't get a ribbon," Jay Hexham says. He says he grew to love dahlias too after doing the "hard work" of digging holes and putting stakes in the ground, a task that was difficult for his wife. "That makes it a man's flower — a lot of men are dahlia growers."

Kathy Burke, 68, of Northport, has 152 dahlias in her garden and says that part of the appeal of the flower is that there are so many types, colors and sizes. According to the American Dahlia Society there are 42 recognized species and several subspecies.

Burke, a Mid Island member, happily admits to being obsessed with all things dahlia. She says, "During [superstorm] Sandy I was in my raincoat tying up my blooms."

DANIELLE SILVERMAN

PHOTOGRAPH BY DANIELLE SILVERMAN