

HOME & GARDENS

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Dahlia Diehards

Every grower has an opinion on how to winter over the tubers

By Suzanne Curley

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NAMED FOR SWEDISH botanist Andreas Dahl, the dahlia — like the potato, the tomato and corn — was a Mexican native that caught the eye of New World explorers in the 16th Century. These early forebears of today's 40,000 named varieties of dahlias were single-flowered lavender or rosy mammoths that often topped off at 18 feet.

Admiration for these flowers today reaches equally towering heights, especially hereabouts, where we have two of the 25 national Dahlia Societies, the Mid-Island Dahlia Society, one of the largest in the country (250 members), and the Long Island Dahlia Society (50 members). Folks come here from as far away as Washington, D.C., bearing their best blossoms, to compete in three annual shows. And in 2001 the American Dahlia Society's national show will be at Planting Fields Arboretum in Oyster Bay.

Though gorgeous and easy to grow (given lots of sun), dahlias put some gardeners off because they are not winter-hardy, meaning that within 10 days or so of the first hard frost, the tubers must be dug up and stored indoors until spring, when they can be divided and planted once more.

In her comic memoir, "Beds I Have Known: Confessions of a Passionate Amateur Gardener" (Moyer Bell, \$14.95), Martha Smith describes her favorite neighbor, nicknamed "John the Dahlia King" by friends after one heated, daylong dispute on whether the best storage medium for the tubers was dry newspaper or vermiculite. (Cut-up plastic bottles, shredded computer paper, peat moss, sand, dry leaves and Styrofoam peanuts, by the way, are stoutly championed by other fanciers.)

"There is certain basic

information about dahlia storage," Smith writes. "They need to be dry but not too dry; cool but not cold. They must be kept in a temperature above thirty-two degrees, with forty-four the ideal. They are susceptible to all sorts of rot and spreading fungus and, if they're stored together, these dread diseases can sweep through and wipe out the entire batch. That said, it must also be noted that nobody agrees on the best methods of achieving these conditions.

"If three dahlia growers get together," she adds, "they either elect officers or start arguing about whose storage system is the best."

It's enough to make you turn to fake flowers, or at least stick with impatiens or geraniums. But sometimes, nothing will do but dahlias. Growing up in Deer Park in the '20s and '30s, Mario Bianco shared his father's passion for the gaudy plant. "Everyone's different," he says. "My brother, forget about it, he wouldn't know a weed from a rose." But when the gardening bug bit young Mario, it never let go. Now that he's retired from his long career as a cosmetician, he can devote plenty of time to the 80 or 90 varieties of dahlias he grows in West Babylon.

Bianco, active with the Mid-Island Dahlia Society for many years, has firm views on how dahlias should spend the winter. He digs his up, cuts the tops off, lays them out on the grass and hoses the dirt off, soaks them in a tub of water with a cup of bleach in it (to kill germs), then puts them on a dry patch of lawn out of the sun to dry. Lining several empty apple boxes (the kind with covers) with 10 or 15 pages of newspaper, Bianco gently sets the tubers in, closes the lids and puts them down for a long winter's nap.

"Put them in the coldest part of your basement," he says, "or, if you have an attached garage, on the wall closest to the house, covered with a blanket. Keep a thermometer nearby, because if it goes below freezing, you'll have to bring them inside overnight."

Then there's the labeling question. Also tricky. "I cut up old plastic bleach bottles to make tags, punch a hole in each and thread wire or string through," Bianco says. "I write on the label with a black Sharpie pen — that's important, because otherwise it can wash off. Don't use an



Mario Bianco with his last bouquet. He cleans the tubers and stores them in an apple box.

old Sharpie; you have to have one that's fresh, not dried out. Label the plant where it's growing, then store the tuber with the tag attached." In February, when it's time to divide the tubers, he simply writes the name on the dry skin of each.

Overwhelmed? Maybe it's time for a second opinion. Compared to Bianco's, retired Amityville police officer Bill Smith's way of dealing with dahlias is, well, down to earth. He purchased his first tubers 15 years ago, on a whim — "the pictures on the packages just looked so beautiful," he recalls — and was hooked.

"The plants expand by themselves," he says. "Instead of one, you end up with two — then I got more as gifts from my kids." Lack of space eventually stopped this geometric expansion at 50 clumps. His favorite is a 6-foot, shrimp-colored variety with 6-inch blossoms. ("I never bother to learn the names," he confesses.)

Smith — who first got his hands in the soil as a 10-year-old back in 1942 turning over a neighbor lady's Victory Garden — has a routine that

works for him: He simply digs up the tubers (having clipped frost-blackened foliage back to 4 to 6 inches), hangs them upside down in the garage for a few nights to dry, brushes them off, then lays them, stem side up, in eight or 10 paper grocery bags. Rolling the tops of the bags shut, he moves them to a table in his cellar.

He even forgoes labeling. "I've always done it the simpler way." The tall ones, he says, look bigger; the shorter ones, smaller. Since he loves them all, he doesn't care which goes where. "I've never been what they call a serious grower," Smith says with some humility, "but I've had such great success it doesn't matter."

Whether you want to become a laissez-faire dahlia grower or a perfectionist, you can get further information from:

- Mid-Island Dahlia Society, Bill Allgeier, 516-433-6371.
- Long Island Dahlia Society, Dennis Kirschner, 516-239-7260.
- American Dahlia Society, Alan Fisher, 202-326-3516 or 301-424-6641. ■

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