

HOME & GARDENS

The Dazzling DAHLIA

Autumn's spectacular queen holds court at Planting Fields' new memorial garden

NOW THAT FALL is here, you can clamor for chrysanthemums and applaud for asters and scream for *Sedum Autumn Joy*. But as for me, I'm dotty for dahlias. They're not just summer show-stoppers. Dahlias are the divas of the fall season.

For weeks they've been dazzling my husband and me at the gates of our own garden—where they sparkle in shades of white and pink and orange and magenta. They're big and brassy and blowsy but they're no here-today-gone-tomorrow hussies. Although they may be flashy, they're not frivolous. They flower from summer until frost and their blooms become brighter as the nights become cooler.

It's hard for me to believe that when the Spanish conquistadors first spotted dahlias in Mexico—they grow wild at altitudes of up to 10,000 feet in Central and South America

—they were more interested in the tubers, which look a little like potatoes, than the blossoms. But the dahlia was a dud as a spud—one early critic described its taste as repulsive and peppery. It took the French to finally realize that if the dahlia was a disaster in the kitchen, it was *crème de la crème* in the garden.



Irene Virag

And when Marie Antoinette took a fancy to dahlias, their prices skyrocketed to the point where a single tuber was said to have been swapped for a diamond. But then a Polish prince who was courting the queen got into her dahlia bed and made off with some of her prize cultivars and the market crashed.

Nowadays, you don't have to be royalty to enjoy dahlias. And there are so many to choose from. If you'd like to see just how drop-dead-gorgeous these flowers can be, a tapestry of shapes and colors is on display right now at the new Paul Callahan Memorial Dahlia Garden at Planting Fields Arboretum in Oyster Bay. The garden is a newly designed and expanded successor to the old dahlia plot that once bloomed nearby. It opens officially tomorrow and should be one of the main attractions of the arboretum's 96th annual fall garden festival, which starts Saturday.

I strolled along the paths of this dahlia heaven recently with a bunch of enthusiastic growers from the Mid-Island Dahlia Society, whose members tend the 17 beds that glitter in the 100-by-100-foot garden. It's named after the late chiropractor and Planting Fields volunteer who helped establish the old display. "Paul would have loved this," said Vinnie Simeone, assistant director of the arboretum. "All his favorite dahlias are here, including one in the center bed that's named after him."

I made sure I saw the variety named Paul Callahan, which is a burst of orange and yellow in a graceful semi-cactus shape, and I thought that having a flower named after you must be one of the sweetest claims to immortality a gardener can have. Especially a dahlia, which endures through the opulence of summer into the poignancy of autumn.

Don't hold me to it but I think I saw representatives of all 16 official classifications of dahlias, which are based

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PHOTO: NEWSDAY/THURSDAY, OCTOBER 1, 1998

DAHLIA DIVERSITY. At the Planting Fields' new Paul Callahan Memorial Dahlia Garden, the flower once coveted by royalty, blooms in a dizzying range of shapes — some recalling anemones, peonies, daisies or cactus flowers — and sizes, with some growing as big as dinner plates.



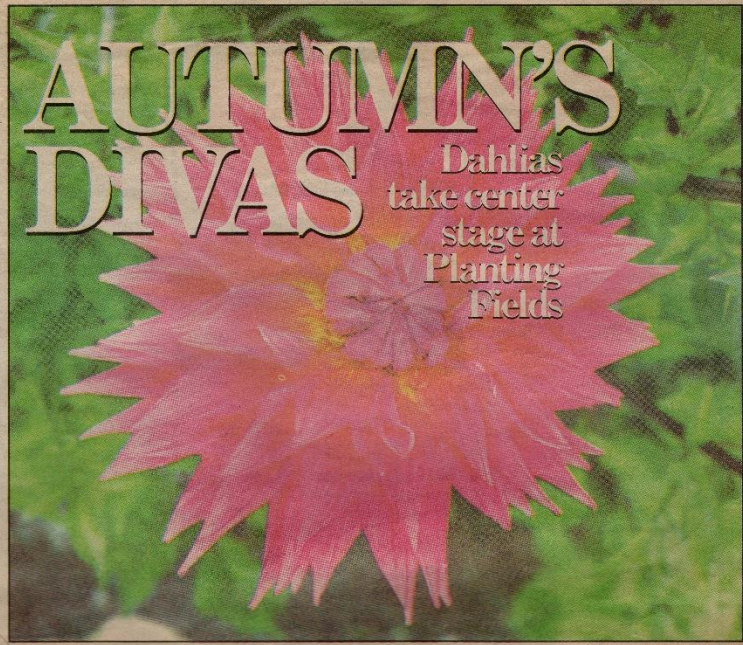
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Steve Nowotarski, left, president of the Dahlia Society and director of dahlia planting at Planting Fields Arboretum, dead-heads flowers with Bill Aldridge. At right, Doris Aldridge admires a dinner plate-size dahlia.



AUTUMN'S DIVAS Dahlias take center stage at Planting Fields

Newsday Photos / Michael E. Aeb

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on the flower forms — everything from dahlias shaped like peonies and anemones and cacti to dahlias shaped like daisies and orchids and water lilies. There are tiny dahlias two inches in diameter and giants the size of 12-inch dinner plates. The plants themselves range from six-inch dwarfs to 10-foot

PUTTING DAHLIAS TO BED

LIKE MOST DIVAS, dahlias need a beauty rest. And you have to put them to bed for the winter properly.

Most growers wait until the first hard frost blackens the blooms. You can dig them out before then as long as they've had 150 days of growing. But you shouldn't wait much longer than one week after the frost.

Some fanciers actually wax their dahlia tubers with paraffin before storing them, but it's not necessary. And it's OK to wait till spring to divide the root clumps. With a sharp knife or pruning shears, cut the tubers so that each division has at least one shoot or budding eye.

Here's some advice for digging and storing dahlias:

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

Dig around each clump, about a foot from the plant, and gently pry out the root mass. Don't pull the tuber by the stalk. Shake off excess soil and hose the 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. Don't use peat moss as it pulls water from the roots. Cover with sheets of newspaper and close the box, leaving hand holes at each end for ventilation.

Store in a cool place between 35 and 50 degrees — 40 is ideal. If it's too cold tubers may turn to mush. If it's too hot, they could dry up.

When the tubers are stored, it's time to work compost into the dahlia beds. ■

titans. Dahlias come in 15 shades including bicolors and blends. The only color that breeders have never achieved is blue, even though a prize of one thousand pounds was offered for a blue dahlia in 1826.

When it comes to flowers, dahlias have it all except for one thing — fragrance. "Dahlias have no scent — yet," said one of my guides, Steve Nowotarski of Massapequa Park, who is the society's president. Some dahlia growers get ideas when they see visitors sticking their noses into the blooms at juried shows. "If you're at a show and you come across a dahlia with a scent, it just means that the grower squirted some of his cologne in the blooms," said Steve with a grin. "It's been known to happen."

It seems to Steve that most growers of exhibition dahlias are men, and I have to wonder if there isn't a testosterone thing going on here. "The shows are fiercely competitive," Steve said. "There's a guy from Connecticut who calls me every year and dares me to beat him." The Mid-island Dahlia Society will hold a show as part of this weekend's festivities so you might want to be on the lookout for men wielding cologne bottles. And if you want to mark your calendar for some real action, the island's growers will host the National Dahlia Society convention at Planting Fields in the year 2001.

But back to my day of delight in the new garden, where there are more than 300 plants featuring 250 named varieties — all of them perfectly staked as they should be. I admired deep red Juanita, an exhibition quality dahlia with blooms like cactus flowers, and orange Hamilton Lillian — "one of the most perfect dahlias in the world," Steve said. "It's difficult to grow to perfection because it has a recessive yellow gene that wants to come forward. But it's won more higher awards than any other dahlia."

I was taken by Ellen Huston, a saucy little number with foliage that is unusually dark for a dahlia. It looked resplendent in red massed at the corners of a low tumbling border of *Verbena* Homestead Purple. Steve told me Ellen Huston requires minimal care and mingles happily with yellow marigolds in his own garden.

My dalliance with dahlias continued past Fidalgo Kay, a spidery flower in blends of yellow and peach, and Fernhill Flamingo, a hot pink bloom bigger than a baseball. I couldn't help noticing Shrimp Louis, which has a purple bud that opens into an orange blossom, and yellow Bo-De-O, as big and brilliant as the sun itself.

Clearly, it was an inspirational visit. The garden is a dangerous place for people like me who want to grow everything they see. Dahlias are at their best

in fall but you can't plant them until the earth warms in spring. So I took a lot of notes — especially when Steve suggested dahlias for those of us who are content with growing them for our own enjoyment instead of blue ribbons. I liked what he said about Magic Moment, a white semi-cactus-like flower with a flush of lavender. "It grows like a weed. It's the one I give to friends who've never grown dahlias."

And there's Long Island Lil with brilliant orange blooms 4 to 6 inches in diameter and Brookside Snowball with moderate-size pure white flowers. I was intrigued by Honka, which resembles a yellow orchid and looks great in bouquets. And I marked my notebook the minute Steve mentioned Zorro. I don't know if it's as much of a turn-on as Antonio Banderas but it sounds exciting with stunning dark red flowers.

I don't know if I'd swap a diamond for a tuber or trade in my husband for Zorro, but I'd go a long way for a dahlia. I'd certainly go to Planting Fields. ■

FESTIVAL HIGHLIGHTS

DAHLIAS AREN'T the only attraction at Planting Fields Arboretum State Historic Park in Oyster Bay this weekend and next. The 96th Annual Fall Garden Festival features landscaped display gardens, floral arrangements, plant sales, horticultural exhibits, hay rides, pumpkin picking, a petting zoo and children's entertainment.

The festival takes place Saturday and Sunday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., and continues Columbus Day weekend, Oct. 10, 11 and 12. Admission, which includes parking, is \$5 per person; children under 12 are admitted free. For more information, call 516-922-9200, ext. 107.

The opening weekend highlights include flower shows by the Mid-Island Dahlia Society and the Second District Federated Garden Clubs of New York, as well as an art sale by the Suburban Art League of Long Island. During Columbus Day weekend, chrysanthemums take center stage when the Long Island Chrysanthemum Society hosts its annual flower show. Free concerts by children's entertainer Lyle Cogen are scheduled for 2 p.m. on Saturdays and Sundays. ■

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