

G10 gardens

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HW LIFE

Dazzling dahlias, stars of the show



IRENE VIRAG

As the season starts cooling down, dahlias start heating up. They shine in beds and borders throughout our island but at Planting Fields Arboretum in Oyster Bay next weekend, they'll sizzle. Not only because the state park's dahlia garden — one of the largest public displays on the East Coast — should be in full bloom. But because the American Dahlia Society's national show will be taking place in the arboretum's horticulture center.

As flower shows go, this one is hot, hot, hot. I attended the last national bloom-a-rama at Planting Fields five years ago, and found myself dazzled by the diversity of the entries. Dahlias as small as golf balls and almost as large as soccer balls. Dahlias with twisted petals, dahlias that resemble orchids, dahlias that look like anemones and pompons and peonies. As well as cactus dahlias named for spiky petals that radiate in all directions.

This year, growers from across the world are expected to enter more than 3,000 of their favorites for display and judging. The show is sponsored by the Planting Fields Foundation and the Mid Island Dahlia Society, which nurtures the arboretum garden.

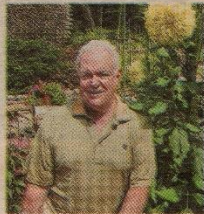
Growing show dahlias is, well . . . a little like breeding show dogs or thoroughbred horses. If dahlias are the divas of fall, show dahlias are super

divas. Growers preen, prune and pamper their favorites to make points for everything from form and foliage to size and color. They don't just water and weed and provide tall wood stakes for the growing stalks to lean on. They go so far as to protect their blooms from the elements with umbrellas because, you see, rain and dew can actually stain the petals of a contender. They've been known to clean the cut flowers with wet Q-tips and transport them to the show tables in special travel containers.

And comparing local and regional shows to the national competition is like comparing summer stock to Broadway. Or, as co-chair Steve Nowotarski of Massapequa, a past president of the Mid Island group who oversees volunteers at the Planting Fields garden, once told me: "It's the Olympics of dahlia growers."

Actually, I started psyching myself up for this year's extravaganza back in the spring when I watched Steve's DVD "Growing Dahlias in Containers" (ContainerDahlias.com). It inspired me to plant My Love — don't get nervous, it's a white dahlia, not my husband — in a pot. And I put pink Pretty Lady in another pot with lavender Firefly impatiens, raspberry verbena and a grass called *Carex comans*. Frosted curls that I'm quite enamored with. And red Bishop of Llandaff and lavender Park Princess that overwintered in the garage are brightening the garden.

Then I checked out a dahlia grower named Peter Tilles. You may know him as a build-



Peter Tilles in his dahlia garden

IF YOU GO

The American Dahlia Society has its 40th national show at Planting Fields Arboretum in Oyster Bay Saturday and Sunday, Sept. 16 and 17. A rainbow of more than 3,000 flowers in all shapes and sizes will be on display in the horticulture center for judges to score and for visitors to admire. Show times are 2 to 5 p.m. Saturday and 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Sunday. Admission is included in the arboretum's \$5 parking fee. For more information, visit the Mid Island Dahlia Society at midislanddahlia.com or the arboretum at plantingfields.org.

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er and philanthropist, but the only business we talked was horticulture. Especially dahlias. Not that they were his first botanical love. "I tried chrysanthemums, but there wasn't enough variety for me," he explained. "For a while, I was into orchids; I love orchids. But once I got into dahlias — that was it. So many sizes, colors, varieties. I don't have a favorite, and I forget some of the names, but I just love them."

Peter doesn't pretend to be a dahlia expert but, as a long-standing member of the Mid Island Society and a board member of the Planting Fields Foundation, he's hardly a dilettante. He knows how to treat a flower. "I plant them between May 15 and June 1, and I tag them all. Around Thanksgiving, I dig them out. You have to dry and store them properly — otherwise, water stays in the stems and a fungus can kill them."

Like everything on his pristinely wooded 10-acre property in Matinecock, Peter's dahlia garden is in harmony with his house. "The whole concept here is merging with nature — inside and out," he said. The house sits on top of an 80-foot slope in the middle of the woods. It was designed to fit into the contours of the land so no trees had to be cut down during construction. Floor-to-ceiling windows afford views of the woods and the pool and the flower borders as well as the natural beauty of Upper Francis Pond, where great blue herons hang out.

The dahlia garden sits in a sunny clearing at the bottom

of the slope. A round metal sculpture with a 10-foot diameter stands in the middle of the garden. "Some people say it's a dahlia," Peter told me, "others think it looks like the sun. I designed the dahlia beds to radiate from it like rays of the sun."

Almost 200 dahlias are planted in the six stone-bordered raised beds. Dahlias or not, the garden still looks like a garden should. Petunias, heucheras, hibiscus, calla lilies, caladiums, coleus and potted melampodium color the sides of each ray. Russian sage, impatiens, irises, rudbeckia and liatris also share the stage. As for the dahlias, yellow Kelvin Floodlight and the small, sunny flowers of Normandy Lemondrop were coming on when I visited. Other varieties waiting their turn included white All Triumph, Swan Sunset and Golden Mungus Bruce, which Peter described as "gorgeous, magnificent."

"Some people spend all year worrying about what dahlia will be ready for the show," he told me. "I'll enter whatever is looking good that day."

If you're planning to attend the extravaganza, you should also allot some time for the arboretum's Paul Callahan Dahlia Garden. You'll see dahlias in all their glory. From creamy white classic Swanlake and dark-leaved Karma Chocolate to pink Bernadette Castro — the state park commissioner is a dahlia lover — and lavender-white Ace Summer Emotions.

Plus a fiery red number called Heatwave. Right now, dahlias are hot, hot, hot.



In the center of his garden in Matinecock, Tilles has a giant metal sculpture from which his raised dahlia beds radiate.



PHOTOS BY IRENE VIRAG