

## Home/Garden

# Dahlias bring joy to gardeners

Dahlias were discovered by Cortez in Mexico, and were treasured by the Empress Josephine, but were a disappointment to the Swedish botanist Anders Dahl when he found out the tubers were not edible. Still, Dahl was intrigued and began selecting plants to cross and created new plant forms.

In 1789 the King of Spain held a festival to celebrate Spain's discovery of this beautiful flower. However the Aztec name, *cocochitl*, was impossible to pronounce, so in honor of the work Dahl had done with the plant, it was renamed dahlia. Ever since the early 1800s the dahlia has been widely planted in parks and gardens, a joy to gardeners and flower arrangers.

Plant breeders have continued the work begun by Anders Dahl and today the American Dahlia Society recognizes 12 groups of cultivars, based on external form and flower structure. The four most popular flower forms are the pompom, double and semi-double dahlias, and the cactus. All of them are easy to grow from flower or tuber and make excellent cut flowers.

The pompom bears short, tight, cup shaped blooms, usually about two inches in diameter, on plants that are three to four feet tall.

Double dahlia blossoms contain several rows of many petals surrounding a central disk. The semi-double flowers have fewer rows of petals. These also make up the family that are smallest.

Cactus-form dahlias often grow tall, four or five feet in height. The petals are elongated, quill shaped and can be curved toward the center of the flower.

Dahlias are extremely desirable plants because they do have all these different flower forms, and come in nearly every color except blue. There are deep colors from rich dark reds and maroons through shades of purple and lavender, clear pas-

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Between The Rows

tel pinks and yellow to bright red and white. All of them will last in a flower arrangement beautifully for more than a week. It's no wonder that the National Garden Bureau has decreed 1988 the Year of the Dahlia.

You can grow dahlias as part of your flower border, or in a separate cutting garden. Give them a sunny location and humusy garden soil that has been enriched with an extra dose of phosphorous and potash (too much nitrogen will only give you rank foliage), and you should have very little trouble with pests or disease.

Many people grow dahlias from tubers, but they are easy to start from seed. The seeds are large and can be started indoors six or seven weeks before you plan to put them outdoors (about the same time you'd set tomato transplants in the garden — after all chance of frost is past).

Use a sterilized soilless seed starting mix and a flat with drainage holes. Make a half-inch trench in the soil medium. Place seed in the trench and cover over. Water very gently, but thoroughly. Dahlia seed requires 65 to 70 degree soil temperatures so keep your flats warm and watered.

Within 10 to 14 days the seed will germinate. Place the flat in the sun or under grow lights. After the true leaves appear, water with a dilute solution of liquid fertilizer. Before putting your dahlia seedlings outdoors, harden them off as you

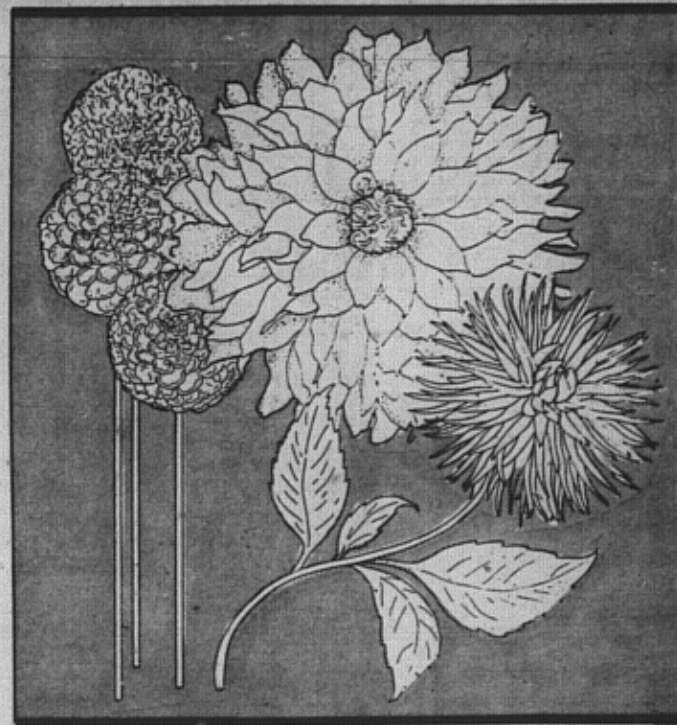
would any other seedling, getting them accustomed to harsher outdoor conditions gradually.

Spacing of plants is important because they need air circulation and enough room to spread out as they mature. Dwarf plants can be planted about a foot apart in the front of the garden. Taller plants like the cactus or pompoms need 18 to 24 inches between plants. These tall varieties sometimes need staking, especially if your garden is in a breezy location.

If you are interested in entering your dahlias in a local flower show or fair, you might want to encourage your plants to produce especially large flowers by careful pruning and disbudding. When the flower buds appear, remove the two lateral buds in the main cluster, to leave a single bud. Pompoms and dwarf dahlias can be disbudded to encourage a more bushy and branched plant. When the first four pairs of leaves have appeared, the end bud should be pinched. Later, pinch the end bud of the first four lateral shoots.

Dahlias will bloom from mid-summer until frost. After frost you can lift the dahlia tubers and store them in a cool location during the winter and plant them directly in the garden next spring. Check the tubers and cut off any that look dead or shriveled. Store the rest in a box or bag of loose vermiculite or peat moss in the cellar (35-50 degrees).

*Seed Sources: Comstock, Ferre & Co., 263 Main St., Wethersfield, CT 06109; Harris Seeds, 961 Lyell Ave., Rochester, NY 14606; Earl May Seed & Nursery, Shenandoah, IA 51603; Park Seed Co., Cokesbury Road, Greenwood, SC 29647-0001; Pinetree Garden Seeds, New Gloucester, ME 04260; Thompson & Morgan, P.O. Box 1308, Jackson, NJ 08527.*



Recorder/Pat Allen

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