

## Dazzle Them With Dahlias

The first dahlia tubers arrived in Europe at the end of the 18th century, sent over to Madrid by Spanish settlers in Mexico. Andreas Dahl (after whom the plant is named) regarded it as a vegetable rather than a garden flower, but interest switched from the edible tubers to the blooms when the first varieties with large, double flowers were bred in Belgium in 1815. Within a few years nearly every colour we now admire had been introduced and Victorian catalogues listed hundreds of varieties. The favourites in those days were the ball and small decorative dahlias. Today it is the large decorative and cactus varieties that capture the public fancy. Fashions change but the popularity of this late summer flower continues to increase. The reasons for this devotion to the dahlia are fairly obvious. First of all the skill of breeders in England, Holland, Germany, Australia and America has produced a range of sizes and colours unmatched in the world of garden flowers. Plants ranging from 12-inch-high dwarf bedders to six-foot giants. Flowers range in size from one inch to the largest dinner plate.

Equally important is the time of flowering. From the end of July to the first frosts, dahlias provide large orbs of colour when so many flowers are past their best. Above all the dahlia is an accommodating plant. It likes a good loam, but will grow almost anywhere. It relishes sunshine, but tolerates partial shade. A bed just for dahlias is really the ideal way to grow them, but they are quite at home in the herbaceous border or even the rockery for dwarf bedding varieties.

Even the novice gardener can grow great dahlias. Plant the tubers when all danger of frost is past, and if no tubers are available then a trip to the garden centre offers a wide range of pot tubers or rooted cuttings. With planting out of the way, it's just a matter of staking when the stems threaten to fall over and the foliage is sprayed when blackfly becomes a nuisance. Even with such simple treatment a surprisingly good display can be obtained.

But it need not be an easy plant. For the enthusiast, growing dahlias is an exacting and absorbing hobby. There are soil mixtures and composts to prepare in winter, cuttings to raise from tubers, growing points to pinch out, fertilizer to apply, side shoots to remove, plants to disbud, roots to be kept moist and show blooms to stage. There are many challenges for the enthusiast; there is the world record 21-inch bloom to beat, the elusive blue dahlia to raise and a variety of show awards to win.

Dahlias are excellent for providing cut flowers and will bloom vigorously throughout the summer until the first frosts. Colours range from vibrant pinks and crimsons through rich hues of mauves and purples to the pastel shades of lilacs, pinks, and creams. Under the right conditions a single plant may produce as many as 100 blooms!