

GARDEN DAHLIAS*Kathleen Szabo, MGV 1993*

Dahlias are divas in the garden. Their flowers are spectacular and come in a huge variety of colors, sizes and shapes. Many dahlia enthusiasts grow them for exhibition. They baby their plants by giving them dedicated beds, pinching, debranching, debudding, staking and providing them with their own umbrellas to prevent sun scorch. They even massage the stems so the blooms grow at the proper angle. Yikes! This may be great fun for some, but what about us ordinary gardeners who only want an attractive garden and lots of flowers to pick? While exhibition-worthy dahlias may have beautiful flowers, the plants themselves are nothing much to look at. I liken them to hybrid tea roses. Many are tall enough to require very sturdy stakes. Tying them can become a pain. You might be able to hide them at the back of the border, but I'd rather admire the whole plants in my garden. Luckily, there are new, as well as older, cultivars that fill the bill.

**Gallery 'Pablo'****Impression 'Fabula'****Dahlinova 'Virginia'**

Currently there are over 20 varieties in the Gallery series, all named for famous painters or art movements. They feature bushy plants that require no staking or pinching and are covered with flowers all summer. They only grow 10 to 18 inches tall, so they are ideal for the front of the border and containers. They come in a wide range of colors. The 4- to 6-inch flowers would be classified as having waterlily forms. The stems are short, but can be arranged in a shorter vase, especially if you use oasis. A similar type is the Dahlinova series which grows even shorter at 8 inches with 3- to 4-inch blooms.

Another easy-care type is the Impression series. They are a little taller, at 12 to 24 inches, and not quite so floriferous as the Gallery series, but they still produce lots of flowers. Their stems are a little longer and the flowers have good vase life. They are all collarette forms, which have flat, rayed petals around open, fringed centers. This allows the pollen to be readily available to attract bees and butterflies. Currently, there are 5 varieties. The plant's spread is 12 to 24 inches, so plant them in groups of 3 to 5 for best effect.



Another whole class of dahlias is the one with bronze to purple leaves. They give a pop of color even when not in bloom. For decades, 'Bishop of Llandaff' has been the darling of snobbish British gardeners who think exhibition dahlias are crass. The late, great Christopher Lloyd showed them when he dug up the ancient rose garden at his estate, Great Dixter, and planted exotics like dinner plate dahlias, cannas, and banana plants. But that's another story. Bishop has dark bronze foliage



and dark red, peony-formed open blossoms. They are bee magnets in my garden. There are many hybrids, such as 'Japanese Bishop,' which has orange flowers. You may have seen 'Bishop's Children' seeds or seedlings available for sale that come in a wide variety of single- and bi-colored hues. Being under 4 feet tall, they only need a few bamboo stakes or a grow-through as many other perennials do. Other dark beauties include red 'Ellen Houston,' orange 'David Howard,' **'Bishop of Llandaff,'** yellow 'Mystic Illusion,' and pink 'Fascination.'

Edging dahlias are easily available as seeds or seedlings. Redskin even has dark leaves.

There is a classification of dahlias called Mignon single. They grow 12 to 18 inches tall, with single flowers up to 2," and are perfect for containers. A popular one is 'Inflammation.' Dozens of named



'Inflammation'



'Park Princess'



'Nettie'

varieties of dahlias grow low and bushy and don't require significant staking or fussing. Some that I've grown are: Orange 'Alfred Grille' and 'Hy Clown,' 'Red Pygmy,' white 'My Love,' purple 'Lupin Chris,' pink 'Park Princess' and lemon yellow 'Nettie.'

The Colorado Dahlia Society has a wonderful website, www.dahlias.net. It pictures dozens of dahlias, shows sources for purchasing, and offers great instructions on growing.

Don't be intimidated by dahlias. You don't need to win first prize at the county fair. And you don't have to dig and store the tubers each year. Treat them like geraniums and buy new ones next year. I'll have some of my tubers available at Plants in the Park next summer. The Dahlia Society of Ohio, www.dahliasocietyofohio.org, also has tuber and plant sales each spring.

Photo Credits:

Gallery 'Pablo' and Karma 'choc' - verwer-dahlias.nl Impression 'Fabula' - gardenia.net Dahlinova 'Virginia' - Jungseed.com
'Bishop of Llandaff,' 'Inflammation,' 'Park Princess,' 'Nettie' - bing.com/images