

# *diverse, decadent* Dahlias

Dahlia fanciers across the country share their love for these brilliant beauties and suggest the best selections to grow for garden enjoyment.

BY JESSIE KEITH



**F**OR FLORAL flamboyance, dahlias are hard to beat. The diversity of flower color and forms as well as growth habits and relative ease of culture make these ever-blooming tuberous plants favorites for gardeners worldwide. For some, what starts as growing a few garden varieties evolves into an obsession where

hundreds are meticulously grown and hybridized in a quest for the perfect bloom for the competitive show arena. Hardline dahlia lovers exist across America—anywhere these flowers can be grown with reasonable success. The American Dahlia Society (ADS) is the organizational hub of the North American dahlia world, over-

seeing 75 regional dahlia societies that host over 100 shows and many gardens both for trials and public enjoyment. Each North American growing region, from New York to California, offers a unique environment for these flowers, which generally perform best where summer day temperatures are warm, nights cool, and day-lengths be-

**A variety of dahlias provides loads of irresistibly colorful blooms to the late-summer to fall display at Washington's Hovander Homestead Park.**

MARK TURNER



## DAHLIA HISTORY AND GROWING BASICS

You can never love just one dahlia. Dahlias offer a botanical extravaganza of floral beauty with more than 50,000 named cultivars, 15 festive colors, 20 different wildly diverse forms, and blooms ranging from tiny to dinner-plate sized. (For more on dahlia flower forms, visit the American Dahlia Society (ADS) website at [www.dahlia.org](http://www.dahlia.org).) Some have small, tidy habits ideal for containers while others are seven-foot monsters. All are beautiful and unique in their own right.

### HIGH-ALTITUDE ROOTS

The cultivated dahlias we grow today are hybrids of three high-altitude Mexican species—*Dahlia coccinea*, *D. pinnata*, and *D. rosea*—that were first collected in 18th-century Mexico and cultivated at the now defunct Royal Botanic Garden in Mexico City under the care of Spanish botanist, Vicente Cervantes (1755–1829). Shortly after their export to the Royal Gardens of Madrid, Spain, in 1789, European garden hybrids began to appear. Dahlias became the “it” flowers of the Victorian era in the mid-1800s, and by the early 1900s thousands of varieties existed across Europe and North America.

True to their high-altitude lineage, dahlias shine when weather is cool and ambient humidity moderate to low. Conditions with warm days and cool nights are ideal. Provide full to part sun and slightly acidic to neutral, friable, humus-rich soil with good drainage. Keep the tubers evenly moist—not wet—and feed with a low-nitrogen fertilizer formulated for flowers. Shorter varieties are easiest to tend as they don’t require support; tall, large-flowered varieties must be staked or caged to keep them from toppling. Deadhead regularly to keep new blooms coming until frost.

### PLANTING TIPS

Dahlias are most often sold and planted as tubers, but they are also available from some sources as rooted cuttings, which



‘Pinot Noir’ is a short dahlia suited for borders and containers.

provide a head start in the garden. Plan to place orders in the fall so the tubers or cuttings arrive at the proper time in early spring for planting. Cuttings can be planted outdoors after all danger of frost has passed; tubers should not be planted until later, after the soil has sufficiently warmed.

In USDA Hardiness Zones colder than 8, dahlia tubers must be dug and stored indoors through winter if you plan to keep them for the next season. Dig dahlias after their tops wilt following the first light frost. When digging tubers, keep them intact and be careful not to damage their necks, as this is where next year’s buds will appear. Gently clean and dry the tubers before storing them. Pack in a dry peat/vermiculite mix and store in a cool, dry basement, garage, or root cellar that gets no colder than 40 degrees Fahrenheit. Once the threat of frost is past in spring, plant outdoors at a depth of four to six inches. In cool weather, refrain from watering tubers directly after planting to avoid rot.

New dahlias are bred each year, and the best for home gardeners are the compact and floriferous border dahlias that don’t need staking. Steve Nowotarski, who heads up the ADS border dahlia trials, recommends the following five top performers for all regions of the country: ‘Melody Pink Allegro’ (bright pink, four-inch blooms on two-foot-tall plants); ‘Princess Paige’ (five-inch, purple-variegated, white-to-lavender formal decorative flowers on three-foot-tall plants); ‘Pinot Noir’ (four-inch, purple-red cactus flowers on two-and-a-half-foot-tall plants with attractive dark foliage); ‘Claudette’ (four-inch, purple blooms on two-foot-tall plants); and ‘Melody Harmony’ (five-inch, lavender-and-white flowers on two-foot-tall plants with dark foliage).

—J.K.



Most dahlias are sold as tubers like these that should be planted outdoors in spring after the soil has warmed.



tween 12 to 14 hours. High heat, drought, and bright sun challenge perfect flower development, so those living where summers are harsh bear the brunt of the cultural difficulties. As a rule, southern growers have the toughest time and those in the North and Pacific Northwest the easiest.

If you've never grown dahlias or have not grown them in a while, ardent dahlia lovers are eager to change your mind. While they might not convince you to categorize, train, and groom your dahlia flowers like dogs headed to the Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show—as they do—they are sure to open your eyes to the spectacular beauty and pleasure these plants bring to the garden. I talked with some of the country's most committed ADS regional specialists for an overview of American dahlia culture and recommended dahlia varieties they grow and love.

## SOUTH

The South is a tough place to grow dahlias, but Buddy Dean is lucky to live in the cool air of the Great Smoky Mountains in North Carolina. Director of the Great Smoky Mountain Dahlia Trial Garden, an ADS Senior Judge, ADS national classification committee member, and owner of retail dahlia nursery Hilltop Gardens, in Cashiers, North Carolina, Dean first became seriously interested in dahlias after his grandmother gave him 12 tubers to try. In just a few years he was growing as many as 1,600 plants of 400 named varieties, many his own hybrids. After going to his first dahlia show and seeing tables full of exemplary flowers, he took up the quest to outshine them all. "I'm still looking for the elusive perfect flower with crisp color and flawless formation," he admits.

Dean's Hilltop Gardens caters to southern growers raising dahlias for garden enjoyment or show. "The challenge is finding dahlias that perform well in heat," says Dean. "They'll grow, but their flowers won't develop right." He suggests southern growers visit the Dahlia Society of Georgia's website for a list of dahlias for the South (see "Resources," page 35), which is quite extensive and keeps growing. "I have seen southern exhibitors that trial for me," says Dean. "If a new dahlia works, we expand the list."



**Top:** 'Wheels' is a widely available bicolored dahlia that grows well in the hot, humid South. **Above:** Illinois dahlia enthusiast Steve Meggos is shown here in his garden with 'Vassio Meggos', a large-flowered lavender selection he hybridized and named for his daughter.

TOP: JESSIE KEITH. BOTTOM: COURTESY OF STEVE MEGGOS



Among the dahlias on the list that are both popular and easy to grow in the South are two of Dean's favorites, the giant (12-inch), red, semi-cactus 'Danum Meteor' (four feet tall), and 'Hilltop St. Charles', a flame orange-and-yellow incurved cactus (five feet tall). Other good picks for the South include 'Bishop of Llandaff' (dark red flowers and dark leaves, three feet tall); 'Bodacious' (one of my personal favorites; 10- to 12-inch, informal decorative red blooms with orange tips; four-and-a-half feet tall); 'April Dawn' (six- to eight-inch, lavender-and-

greatest loves are my wife, daughter, and my dahlias—in that order," says Meggos. Despite working 70 to 80 hours a week running the banquet hall at an entertainment resort, Meggos maintains more than 1,000 dahlia plants—398 varieties his own hybrids, including the award-winning 'Vassio Meggos' (10-inch decorative informal flowers with graceful, down-curving lavender petals; four-and-half feet tall; introduced in 2005), of which he is most proud. "Its perfect form and color never tire me," says Meggos. "It was named for my teenage daughter, who

period of time to enjoy the flowers. Summer heat and a variety of insect pests also pose potential problems. "Japanese beetles and red spider mites are the worst," says Meggos. "Both can devastate a dahlia garden in a week." (A pyrethrin-based insecticide or insecticidal soap will help control these pests.) In that region of the Midwest, flowers hit their peak from mid-August to late September, according to Meggos, and by early October he's digging up the tubers for the season.

In Midland, Michigan, artist Charles Breed shares his extraordinary love of



**Dahlia Hill, a half-acre public garden, was created by Michigan artist Charles Breed to showcase both his sculptures and his love of dahlias.**

white informal decorative flowers; four feet tall); 'Kidd's Climax' (nine-inch formal decorative, light pink flowers with flushes of soft yellow; four feet tall); and fantastic collarette 'Wheels' (four-inch, red-orange petals framing a set of yellow inner petals; four feet tall).

## NORTH AND MIDWEST

Dahlia passion exudes from dahlia breeding legend Steve Meggos, who lives in Elgin, Illinois, just outside Chicago. "My

wants to decorate her wedding with them, when that day comes." Another notable introduction is 'Louie Meggos', a creamy white sport of 'Vassio Meggos', which is identical on all counts but color.

Because late frosts are a challenge in Elgin, patience is a garden virtue. Meggos says, "I plant one-foot-tall forced cuttings outside after Mother's Day [in early May], when all frost has passed." Dahlia cuttings tend to bloom earlier than tubers, giving short-season growers a longer

dahlias through Dahlia Hill, a half-acre terraced public garden, the grounds of which are dotted with aluminum sculptures cast by Breed himself. (Breed's art studio is also located on the property and sales contribute towards Dahlia Hill's operation.)

The Dahlia Hill Society of Midland, which Breed describes as "a non-profit dedicated to making everyone addicted to dahlias," is largely responsible for the garden's maintenance. Each year, 50 to 70





Steve Nowotarski, left, hybridized the award-winning selection ‘Hannah Baker’, right.

volunteers help Breed and his assistant, Peggy Kernstock, plant and care for the gardens. “We plant about 3,000 dahlias every spring, and in the end store about 10,000. Many are sold to support the next year’s garden,” says Breed.

The plantings represent 250 cultivated varieties that show all 19 dahlia petal configurations as well as the “The Fabulous 50,” a list of the 50 top-winning dahlias at ADS shows. At the top of the garden is a “Memorial Circle” around which is planted only dahlia cultivars that are new to Dahlia Hill, including those developed by Michigan hybridizers.

Mid-Michigan summers are warm during the day with cool nights, ideal for growing most dahlias. Breed’s favorites at Dahlia Hill include ‘Show ‘N’ Tell’ (10-inch lacinated [fringed or split at the ends] red-and-yellow blooms, grows

four-and-a-half feet tall), the dark red-and-white informal decorative ‘Tartan’ (three feet tall) and Dahlia Hill’s own ‘Cristi Yellow’ (semi-cactus with yellow blooms, four feet tall).

#### EAST AND NORTHEAST

Competitiveness and camaraderie are what drew Steve Nowotarski of Long Island, New York, to exhibit dahlias. “Dahlia exhibitors are as tough and competitive as serious golfers or fishermen,” explains Nowotarski. “You must delve into the dahlia to enhance blooms for show. It takes time, but it’s gratifying.”

Nowotarski has served as ADS senior judge and executive committee member, co-authored the ADS book *Raising Beautiful Dahlias the Easy Way* (now out of print), consults on dahlias for mail-order plant retailer White Flower Farm, and is an award-winning hybridizer.

Nowotarski is most proud of the award-winning lacinated pink-and-yellow ‘Hannah Baker’, named for his granddaughter. Introduced in 2001, this plant grows about four feet tall and bears loads of six-inch blooms. More recently he became ADS chairman of border dahlia trials, in which growers nationwide evaluate three dahlias yearly to determine the border dahlia of the year for average home growers (see sidebar on page 31 for Nowotarski’s recommended dahlias).

Long Island offers good growing conditions for dahlias, although summer heat can stunt flower growth and cause colors to wash out. “Flowers look poorest in July,” says Nowotarski, “and best from early fall to frost.” Nowotarski is convinced that soil preparation is key to growing dahlias successfully. “I had plant health problems a few years ago—growth was moderate to poor and flower production lower than normal—so I amended the soil in my garden with compost and went organic. Since then I’ve had no trouble. Good friable soil rich in compost and microbes is everything.”



Kevin Larkin and his wife, Karen, above, specialize in growing rooted dahlia cuttings at their nursery, Corralitos Gardens, right.







## WEST AND PACIFIC NORTHWEST

In central California, where dahlia growing conditions are near perfect, Kevin Larkin makes easy work of raising hundreds of dahlia varieties at his retail nursery, Corralitos Gardens. Larkin, a hobbyist turned hybridizer, retailer, and exhibitor, and his wife, Karen, hybridize their own cultivars and are also top show exhibitors. "Our mantra is simplify dahlia gardening," says Larkin of the nursery, which sells rooted cuttings rather than the more common tubers. "We have found that novice gardeners and newcomers to

**Dahlia exhibitor Marilyn Walton, (above center with volunteers at the Pacific Northwest Dahlia Trial Garden in Tacoma, Washington) recommends 'Mary's Jomanda', left, for its perfectly shaped flower heads.**

dahlias can understand a live green plant better than a dormant root. There are no questions about which way is up or how deep to plant, and there is no waiting for the dormant tuber to sprout."

Larkin says the long California growing season is a bonus: "We can plant as early as March, as late as July, and have perfect flowers up to Thanksgiving." But he also notes some regional constraints: "Our winters are mild, so things don't slow down and pest cycles aren't inhibited. White flies are a constant threat." Treating plants with an organic insecticide will be needed to combat the pests.

In the Pacific Northwest, growing conditions are ideal for most dahlias, but there are exceptions. "Heat-loving dahlias don't grow as well here, and some forms, particularly those with fimbriated or lacinated petals, grow fewer petals, with less depth and less lacination," says Marilyn Walton of Tacoma, Washington. Walton is an ar-

## Sources

**Brent and Becky's Bulbs**, Gloucester, VA. (804) 693-3966.

[www.brentandbeckysbulbs.com](http://www.brentandbeckysbulbs.com).

**Corralitos Gardens**, Corralitos, CA.

(831) 722-9952.

[www.cgdahlias.com](http://www.cgdahlias.com).

**Ferncliff Gardens**, Sumas, WA.

(604) 826-2447.

[www.ferncliffgardens.com](http://www.ferncliffgardens.com).

**Hilltop Gardens**, Cashiers, NC. (828)

421-9458. [www.hilltopdahlias.com](http://www.hilltopdahlias.com).

**Swan Island Dahlias**, Canby, OR.

(503) 266-7711. [www.dahlias.com](http://www.dahlias.com).

**White Flower Farm**, Litchfield, CT.

(800) 420-2852.

[www.whiteflowerfarm.com](http://www.whiteflowerfarm.com).

## Resources

**American Dahlia Society**,

[www.dahlia.org](http://www.dahlia.org).

**The Dahlia Society of Georgia**,

[www.dahliasocietyofgeorgia.com](http://www.dahliasocietyofgeorgia.com).

**Encyclopedia of Dahlias**

by Bill McClaren. Timber Press, Portland, Oregon, 2009.

**A Gardener's Guide to Growing Dahlias**

by Gareth Rowlands. Timber Press, Portland, Oregon, 2003.

dent competitive dahlia exhibitor, dahlia judging instructor, hybridizer, and director of the Washington State Dahlia Society trial garden. Her favorite flowers are chosen for perfect form and performance. "The 2012 Pacific Northwest dahlia of the year, 'Narrows Trisha', is the perfect yellow semi-cactus," says Walton. "The white-and-pink informal decorative 'April Dawn' performs well almost everywhere; and 'Mary's Jomanda' has perfect four-inch, lavender-pink, ball-shaped flowers ideal for both exhibition and garden enjoyment." Plants grow about three feet tall.

So, everyday dahlia lovers take note: Your local dedicated ADS dahlia fanciers can teach you a lot about all things dahlia. Just be careful when you talk to them, their passion is addictive and you might get hooked!

*Freelance writer Jessie Keith grows dahlias in her garden in Wilmington, Delaware.*