



Heirloom dahlias create vibrant, rainbow-hued bouquets that are as long-lasting as they are stunning, and now's the time to plant them.

SUZANNE LEWIS PHOTO

Savoring Dahlias

These colorful, flamboyant heirloom flowers are meant to be enjoyed with lingering appreciation. BY SCOTT KUNST

Bungalow gardeners loved them, Victorian gardeners loved them, and long before the Pilgrims landed, Aztec gardeners loved them. Plant a dahlia or two this spring, and I'll bet you will, too.

Dahlias are easy to grow, they make great cut flowers, and they come in a mind-boggling array of colors, shapes, and sizes. And despite what you may have heard, you don't have to dig them up, even if you garden in Alaska. That's right, you can enjoy these easy, gorgeous, tender bulbs without digging them up in the fall. Yes, they'll die if the ground in your region of the country freezes solid—but life's short, and gardening is supposed to be fun. For a few dollars you can have armloads of exciting, historic flowers from mid-summer through fall's

frost, and then some excellent material for the compost pile.

Dahlia Mania

Dahlias were domesticated by the Aztecs, and first arrived in Europe in 1789. Though simple wildflowers, they contain a wealth of genetic diversity within their DNA. Before long, new colors, forms, and sizes began cropping up, and by 1840 gardeners on both sides of the Atlantic were in the throes of a long-lasting dahlia mania. By the end of the century, some 10,000 named varieties had been introduced, and as late as the 1920s, garden writers were still hailing dahlias as the most popular bulb in America.

Victorian gardeners prized the Ball and Fancy varieties of dahlias, globes of

neatly curled petals arranged so perfectly that it was clear, as Robert Browning wrote, "God's in his Heaven/ All's right with the world." Early 20th-century gardeners, on the other hand, preferred more informal varieties like the mop-headed Cactus dahlias that first appeared in the late 1800s.

Today, after decades of scorn, dahlias are on the rebound. "The style-o-meter has swung 180 degrees," reports trendy *Garden Design* magazine, and "bunches of dahlias now grace the most sophisticated interiors."

Blooming Beauty

Dahlias bloom exuberantly in the fall, which is another great reason they should grace your garden. They're native to the

EIGHT TIMELESS TREASURES

Here are eight of my favorite dahlias to get you started this spring. Choose one to match the era of your house, or plant them all to enjoy more than 200 years of dahlia history in your own back yard.



1 **Dahlia atropurpurea, 1789**
In the beginning, there was *Dahlia atropurpurea*, with its lacy foliage and profuse, single flowers. It's a dark purple form of *D. pinnata*, one of the first three wild dahlias to reach Europe from Mexico.

2 **Bishop of Llandaff, 1927**
With dark, burgundy-bronze foliage and scarlet, almost-single flowers highlighted by a ring of yellow stamens, the "Bishop" was one of the first heirloom dahlias to be rediscovered and appreciated anew by modern gardeners.

3 **White Aster, 1879**
Preserved by a venerable, century-old German nursery, "White Aster" is the world's oldest surviving garden dahlia. A miniature Ball or Pompon, it offers hundreds of small ivory globes set amid lush green foliage.



4 **Kidd's Climax, 1940**
Sure to be on any top-10 list of twentieth-century dahlias, "Kidd's Climax" offers colossal, Dinner-plate-style pink and creamy yellow blooms so excellent that this variety is still winning blue ribbons in dahlia shows across the country.

5 **Kaiser Wilhelm, 1893**
Neatly curled petals of custard-yellow brushed with burgundy, and a green button eye like an old-fashioned rose define the "Kaiser," a true 1800s Fancy dahlia. It's also the most antique-looking of the half-dozen Victorian dahlias that survive today.



6 **Winsome, 1940**
As vividly colored as a tropical fish, this mid-century dahlia has palm-sized flowers of a deep, vibrant rose blending into a center of throbbing yellow-orange, reminding us that "antique" doesn't have to mean sedate.

7 **Jersey's Beauty, 1923**
Once the world's most popular dahlia—one even non-gardeners knew by name—this glorious, true-pink, New-Jersey-bred Formal Decorative is a impressive today as it was nearly 100 years ago . Growing vigorously and tall—up to seven feet—it will give you so many flowers you'll have to give them away.



8 **Juanita, 1949**
This classic Cactus variety has been one of the world's most popular dahlias for decades. Easy and reliable, it offers big, jewel-toned flowers that are a whirl of narrow, curving, burgundy-red petals.

mountain plateaus of Mexico, where nights are always cool, so at summer's end when temperatures drop and most other plants are winding down, dahlias just keep getting better and better, building up into a thrilling crescendo of blooms.

Dahlias are as diverse as dog breeds, so you're sure to find one you like. Some

varieties are neat and tidy, while others are twisted, shaggy, even frizzy. Some have six petals; some boast hundreds. Pompon varieties are smaller than golf balls, while Dinner-plates can span a foot or more in diameter. And except for blue and black, you can buy dahlias in just about any color, including combinations that range from

dreamy to downright shocking.

As cut flowers, dahlias are stunners. In a vase they'll last up to a week, and the more you harvest them, the more they bloom. The smaller ones mingle well, and few things look more elegant than a single, large dahlia blossom floating in an art-pottery bowl.

Outside the Old House



OLD HOUSE GARDENS PHOTO

Dahlias have been delighting gardeners for centuries. The cover on this 1912 seed catalogue shows a sampling of the many dahlias popular with gardeners at the time.

Easy Growing

Dahlias are easy to grow; simply plant them in a sunny spot in average- to well-drained soil, water well, and fertilize several times throughout the summer. You'll need to stake them, but staking takes very little time since, unlike tomatoes that tend to sprawl, dahlias really try to grow upright.

Full-size dahlias are usually sold as tubers. These are either “chicken-legs” (traditional, neatly trimmed single tubers from American growers) or “pot roots” (clusters of small tubers from the mass-market Dutch growers). Both grow equally well.

Buy your tubers as early as you can—many suppliers sell out their stock by late April. But wait to plant them until all danger of frost is past and your soil has warmed up thoroughly—about the time you'd plant tomatoes, or even a little later. (To accelerate blooming, start them in pots indoors a few weeks earlier.) To plant, dig each hole about 6" deep, and pound in a sturdy stake. Lay the tuber hori-

zontally and cover with a couple of inches of soil, then wait. Resist the urge to water until sprouts emerge. In most areas, springtime soil will be damp enough to get dahlias growing, and unsprouted tubers in wet soils can rot.

As each plant gets taller, gradually add more soil to the hole. For a bushier plant, pinch out the center once it has three sets of leaves. Water thoroughly all season long, and fertilize lightly every few weeks. Pick lots of bouquets, and deadhead spent flowers to encourage more blooms.

No matter if your house is Adam or Arts & Crafts, dahlias are a surefire way to add a flourish of show-stopping color to your landscape. And now's the time to plant these easy, long-loved flowers for endless bouquets and a glorious fall garden. 🍂

Landscape historian **Scott Kunst** is the owner of Old House Gardens (www.oldhousegardens.com), a Michigan-based mail order nursery devoted to historic flower bulbs.