

August 15, 2022

Selecting and Growing Dahlias

“August is ripening grain in the fields blowing hot and sunny, the scent of tree-ripened peaches, of hot buttered sweet corn on the cob. Vivid dahlias fling huge tousled blossoms through gardens and joe-pye-weed dusts the meadow purple.”

—Jean Hersey

Last year we created a cutting garden so we could plant flowers for our daughter’s wedding and so I could regularly have fresh floral bouquets in our home. We planted numerous flowers, but dahlias were the majority of the flowers that were planted for the wedding. We successfully overwintered most of the tubers and once again, the cutting garden is full of beautiful dahlias along with cosmos, zinnias, roses, lavender, and several others. Although the garden is full of flowers, I still continue to struggle cutting the flowers for bouquets because they look so beautiful in the garden. I did manage to cut one small bouquet for my desk to admire while I’m working.

Dahlias are popular in landscapes and make excellent additions to border plantings, flowerpots, and cut-flower gardens. They have a very long blooming season (summer through the first frost) and they bloom even more with regular deadheading. They prefer full sun, moderate moisture, and well-drained sandy soil (ours are planted on top of our leech field). Dahlias make excellent cut flowers. In fact, the more dahlia flowers are cut, the more the plant will produce.

Dahlias come in a variety of different colors, size, and types so the challenge for most will be selecting which ones to plant. They can be as short as twelve inches to as tall as six feet and the blooms range from two to twelve inches across. The ones in our garden are around three to four feet tall. Dahlias come a wide range of colors: red, orange, yellow, pink, lavender, white, and even multi-colored. There are variety of types to consider such as: dinnerplate, cactus or semi-cactus, anemone-flowered, collarette, ball and pompon, border, single and peony-flowered, orchid, mignon, decorative, and waterlily dahlias.

There are couple things to dislike about dahlias. They do generally need staking, so you have to plan ahead. It is best to place the stake next to the tuber as soon as you plant it so as not accidentally drive a stake through a tuber later in the summer. Also, it’s easier to keep tying them up a little at a time as they grow versus trying to wrangle a large plant once it has spilled over into your garden. (I speak from experience.) Another thing to not like is that you must dig them in the fall after the first frost. They will not overwinter in our zone. That means also having a place to store them. Of course, if they are happy, the tubers will multiply over the summer as well. If can get over those two things, dahlias are easy to grow making them an excellent addition to your gardens. Plus, they can provide numerous cut flower bouquets if you have the heart to cut them.

Moving away from the flower gardens, here’s an event you should attend that features the amazing tomato. The Terrific Tomato Tasting event is Saturday, August 27 from 10:00 am to 11:30 am and will be held in the Baraboo Civic Center gym, located at 124 2nd Avenue, Baraboo. Attendees will hear cultivar success and/or failure stories, try a variety of tomatoes, and vote on their favorites. There will also be sample dishes featuring tomatoes to taste. The event is sponsored by the Sauk County Master Gardeners Association, along with the Baraboo Parks, Recreation, and Forestry Department and is free and open to the public.

This week's article is written by Jeannie Manis, a Wisconsin Certified Sauk County Master Gardener Volunteer. If you have any gardening questions, please contact the Extension Sauk County by emailing to tripp@wisc.edu or calling the University of Wisconsin Madison Division of Extension Sauk County office at 608-355-3250.