

## The flamboyant Dahlia:

Dahlias are an incredibly diverse flower with many variations to choose from. Native to the mountainous regions of Mexico and Guatemala, they were once cultivated and its tubers were eaten by the Aztec's Indians who called it "Cocoxochitl."

"Spanish invaders into Mexico sent them home to the Old World," according to plant writer Diana Wells "but dahlias did not, like some floral imports, take European gardeners by storm." Dahlia's never did reach the popularity that lilies, irises or tulips did.

Many of the easy to manage dahlias available today are the compact, low growing hybrids that bloom from early summer to frost and come in a multitude of shapes, sizes, and in every color except blue. The smaller varieties are easier to manage and work exceptionally well in flower arrangements. They typically produce better than the larger 6-8 or 8-12 inch saucer types. A dahlia assured me recently saying that the thicker stems of the larger dahlias help support it's large blooms.

Despite this, I find it amusing to grow the mammoth type of dahlias, some of which are purported to grow the size of dinner plates. Although the stems on the larger varieties are thicker, which help support the larger blooms, they still requiring staking. They are not the best for flower cuttings but can enhance the garden with their spectacular displays of large blooms that can dazzle any onlooker.

Purchasing eight mammoth type varieties at the Seattle Garden show, I plan to plant them when the soil is sufficiently warm and dry. Dahlia tubers can rot if they soak in water too long. A dahlia grower at the show said to hold off watering them until they are 6-8 inches high. Specific planting methods, such as opening a 8-12" trench, placing tubers, thick end down, and leaving the trench open until there is several inches of growth before closing it up.

Nita Lackey, a well-seasoned Master Gardener from Madera Ranchos gave me a call recently to announce that she was thinning out her dahlia tubers and replanting. If I wanted some, I had to come without delay. Showing up in short order, I had first choice of the tubers. To exercise caution, I examined them, and though I did not see any evidence of nematodes, there appeared to be root maggots in one of them which I discarded.

Having attended three large city garden shows in the last couple I years, I repeatedly gravitate to the dahlia displays time and again to view newly developed varieties and see some of the most spectacular display booths I have seen in both the San Francisco and Seattle. This was probably due in part, to the blown up photographs showing the diversity of size, color and shape of the bloom.

My attraction to the dahlia booth is merely a personal preference not because it is intrinsically more valuable or more beautiful than any other. My friend Dena who accompanied me to the Seattle show spent an inordinate amount of time at the lily booth where it seemed that every variety of lily produced in the world was there on display. Having choices is one of the reasons events such as this is so attractive.

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