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FOR THE GARDENER

DAHLIA (*Compositae*)

The English pronunciation is "day-lia", in all other countries it is pronounced "dah-lia" as in the name of the Swedish botanist Dr. Andreas Dahl from whom the plant derives its name.

The original habitat of the dahlia was Mexico and it would appear that the Aztecs were well acquainted with it. Records exist from the late 16th century where mention is made of this plant by European adventurers. It was introduced into Europe in the 18th century, by the Spanish, but as a plant it was totally different from the modern species. The original had single, lilac-coloured flowers and grew to the prodigious height of up to 18 feet. Latterly another species was discovered, this was much smaller in growth and had single red flowers. The modern varieties are all derived from the two originals.

Being basically a sub-tropical plant, it needs a good rich soil and very regular watering and feeding to produce the best results. The leaves are a good rich green which set off admirably the variety of exotic colours now available. The subject is ideal for garden display, blooming from late July through to the point where the plants are cut down and blackened by frost.

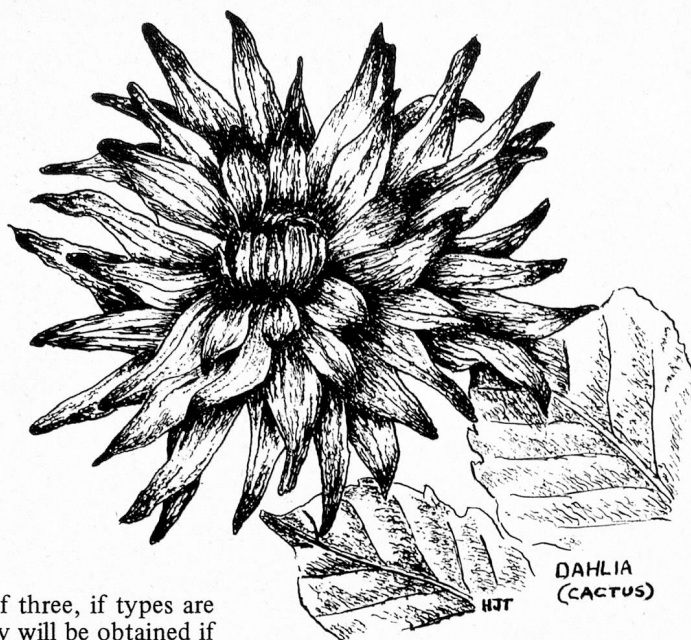
There are two main groups of dahlia, firstly the bedding, grown annually from seed and secondly the tuberous. As the whole subject is so wide it has been decided to concentrate on the tuberous group, this being the more popular. There is a further sub-division of this group, the most usual being the decorative, cactus, ball and pompon, in these various varieties the leaf shapes can vary considerably from round, long and many lobed to the feathery almost fern like.

The plants are best grown in a bed of their own situated in a spot which gets plenty of light. Planting distances are dependant upon the height to which particular types will grow, it is suggested that the following would be a useful guide: tall, 2 to 3 feet apart; medium 2 feet apart and bedding 15 inches apart. The types we are dealing with are best planted either

singly or in groups of three, if types are mixed the best display will be obtained if planted in a triangle of three plants.

The tubers should be planted around mid-April and as new growth arises from the crown one should ensure that one or more tubers are present at the base of the old stem, each tuber should have at least one eye (similar to the potato eye) as this will form the basis of the new growth. Before planting, insert a stout stake into the ground and then dig a hole about 6 inches deep at its base, half fill this hole with moist peat mixed with a nitrogenous fertiliser, place the tuber on this layer with the eye as near as possible to the stake. Fill the hole with earth so that the eye is about 2 inches below the surface. Do not over water in the beginning but when buds appear plenty of moisture will be required to get best results. In hot weather water with about 3 gallons every five days if the soil is heavy and plants are 2 to 3 feet apart. If the type of soil is of the light open variety not quite so much water but apply every three days.

The plants need supporting and as they grow tie to a stake with figure of eight ties, this avoid wind damage. When growths reach around 12 inches in height give a good mulch of say, peat or compost, etc., this will help to control weeds and conserve moisture. It is a good plan to pinch out the central growing tip to encourage good strong side growths and later, in order to obtain large flowers, the

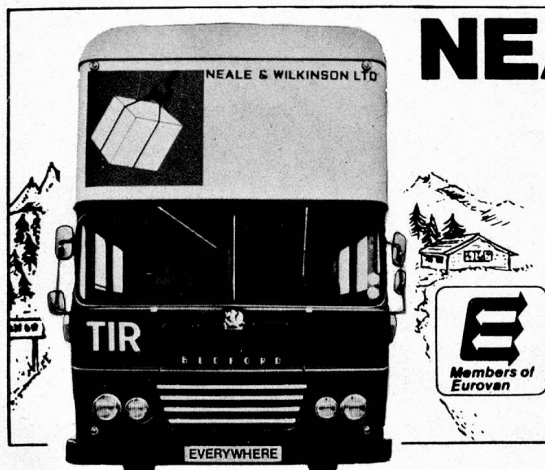


"wing" buds on the side growths should be pinched out leaving the terminal bud to develop into flower. The plants should be sprayed during the season with insecticide to prevent insect damage, the plant is a favourite of the earwig.

For indoor flower display the blooms should be cut in the early morning or in the evening, this is when there is plenty of sap in the stalks. Take with you a bucket or container with warm water in it, put the cut flowers in this, when back indoors transfer the flowers to a container with cold water in it and cut the stems a further 1 inch whilst still under water, leave in this water for a short time and then transfer to your vase or whatever.

Tubers should be dug up at the end of the season as previously mentioned and carefully cleaned of surplus soil, retain the shortened old stem to which the tubers are attached. Place the tubers upside down in a cool airy place to drain off through the stem, they must be quite dry before storing. Dust with "Flowers of Sulphur" to prevent fungoid attack. Store in dry peat, sand or leaves with about 6 inches under and 12 inches over.

There are many further points which could be mentioned, but quite good results will be obtained if the foregoing information is followed.



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