

Lavant Horticultural Society

“**Dahlias**” – a talk by **Nick Gilbert** 8th January 2020

[Gilberts Nursery](#) near Romsey grows over 400 varieties of dahlias; they hybridize to get their own new varieties. They sell dahlias as rooted cuttings and potted plants not only at their nursery, but also by mail order. Nick has appeared on Gardeners’ World, in the national press and on Radio 4’s Gardeners’ Question Time.

Their 2 ½ - 3 acre dahlia production field next to nursery is accessible from July until October.

Questioned about the classification of dahlias, Nick ran through the main categories, showing many examples.

Click on the variety names below to see more

One dahlia that many people will immediately recognise is

‘[Bishop of Llandaff](#)’ – dark foliage and pollen prominent, available to bees – features it shares with:

‘[Twynings’ After Eight](#)’ – single – will continue to produce many flowers even without dead-heading.

Decorative:

‘[Holland Festival](#)’ – giant decorative – curved petals

‘[Kelvin Floodlight](#)’ - giant decorative

‘[Café au Lait](#)’ - giant decorative – very popular, especially with florists.

‘[Ferncliffe Illusion](#)’ - large decorative

‘[Lilac Time](#)’ – small decorative - as close as you get to the elusive blue dahlia

‘[Diana’s Memory](#)’ – medium decorative

‘[Biddenham Strawberry](#)’ – small decorative

‘[Firepot](#)’ – small decorative

Cactus – pointed petals in open framework –

‘[Doris Day](#)’ – cactus – striking red; ‘[Kenora Sunset](#)’

Semi-Cactus

‘[Show ‘n Tell](#)’ – semi-cactus – late flowering

‘[Black Jack](#)’ – large semi-cactus -very dark blooms 6 inches across

Waterlily – ‘[Nepos](#)’; ‘[Tahiti Ruby](#)’

Anemone – something very different from most people’s idea of a dahlia:

‘[Totally Tangerine](#)’; ‘[Blue Bayou](#)’

Pompon

Ball – ball shape with tight petals

Fimbrillated – split petal ends

Orchid – ‘[Trelin Serin](#)’

Collarette – inner ring of petals contrasting with outer ring – good for bees as pollen prominent –

‘[Fashion Monger](#)’; ‘[Chimborazo](#)’

Gilbert’s also do their own hybridising, producing new varieties, such as ‘[Daisy](#)’ AGM and ‘[Monet Sunlight](#)’

It is best to cut flowers either first thing in the morning or last thing in the evening – have a bucket of water with you and put the cut stems into the water immediately. The bottom of the stem should then be cut off under the water to get rid of any air in the stem that might be blocking uptake of the water.

The dahlia is the national flower of Mexico. Aztecs used tubers as food for animals and humans. They were introduced into Europe by Swedish botanist Dahl (hence the name) – species '[Coccinea](#)'

Dahlia imperialis – grows to 18-20 ft in Mexico – needs a hot summer to flower.

Dahlias need full sun and will tolerate very little shade. The exception that will grow in shade is '[Woodridge](#)'.

Dahlias will grow in any soil – Gilberts' main production field next to the nursery is very sandy, whereas their additional plot is heavy clay. The growing time is from May until first frosts

Feed with fish, blood and bone as soon as the shoots show through and then again 8-9 weeks later

Dahlias do very well in containers – pot up with garden soil or with John Innes No.3 compost and feed with fish, blood and bone. After frosts, cut the stems down and put the plants, still in their pots, under cover. After a few weeks when they are drier, cover the pots with a thick layer of newspaper.

If the weather is particularly hot, some shading from full sun helps blooms to open.

Overwintering

Leave plants standing for two weeks after the first frost damage, so that all the sugars and nutrients in the stems can go down into the tubers. Then cut stems down to ground level – if they are not cut right down, the hollow stems can feed rainwater down to the tubers, increasing the risk of rotting. Cover the tubers with a mound of soil or compost, only to protect them against frosts but also to deflect rainwater.

If there have still not been any frosts by mid-December, cut plants back by half.

If tubers are in clay or wet soil, they will need to be lifted. Completely wash them off, getting rid of all the soil etc. in between the tubers. There is no need to start off by putting the tubers upside-down, as often advised. Cut off the stems level with the top of the tubers. Do not cut off the thin roots hanging down from the tubers, as this would leave wounds that could be entry points for rots.

After washing, the tubers must be dried off before they are put into storage

Nick has found expanded polystyrene boxes as used for fish very good for storage

Check stored tubers from time to time – if any part is beginning to rot, cut it off and powder the remaining tuber with yellow sulphur. Indeed, tubers can be powdered with yellow sulphur before going into storage.

Label tubers! You can write name on tuber itself using a good marker pen.

Dividing tubers – wait until they start to shoot, then lift (if they are still in the ground) and divide in two (making sure there are live shoots on both halves) – do not be tempted to divide up into more pieces.

If there is no growth to be seen by the end of May, lift the tubers, cut in half and replant horizontally.

Start off stored tubers by putting them out on trays in the greenhouse or on a window sill with some compost, but do not completely cover them.

Some of the shoots can be used for cuttings, to increase the number of plants, for your own use or to pass onto friends, plant sales etc. Cut the shoot off just above the first pair of leaves with a sharp knife – have a container of bleach at hand to dip the knife in to ensure that it is kept sterile.

Remove all but the top pair of leaves, and you can even remove one of these or cut them in half to reduce moisture loss.

Dip into hormone rooting powder (better than gel). Fill modular trays with peat-free multipurpose compost with John Innes and push the cuttings into the modules, not too deep.

Bottom heat, in a propagator or on a heating mat, will speed up rooting, but is not necessary.

Use liquid feed on the cuttings in the modules – seaweed extract.

After 7 to 14 days you should see that the cuttings are rooting by a change in the appearance of the foliage.

When the cuttings have rooted they can be potted on into small (9 cm) pots – do not use larger pots, as the smaller ones will encourage root formation.

Planting out: In the case of both potted plants and plants from tubers left in the soil, they should be pinched out to make them bushier when they reach 12-18 inches.

Tubers can be planted out when the soil starts to warm up. Make sure that tubers are already shooting before planting them out. Plant them deep, with a handful of fish, blood and bone. Do not worry about burying the existing green growth below the soil – it will quite happily make its way through.

The tubers should be spaced 1 metre apart - any closer will encourage them to grow taller and less bushy.

Staking with robust canes is imperative for all but dwarf dahlias. Nick uses three canes set in a triangle around each tuber. Then, using soft string (so as not cut into the stems) tie the first strand around the growing plant at about 1½ feet, and then a second one above that to embrace the upper growth of the plant.

Disbudding: The flowers usually develop as a main bud with a smaller bud on either side. Remove the smaller buds to leave just the main bud. You can also remove the incipient buds from the next leaf joint down the stem and even from the leaf joint below that, depending on the way that variety grows and the length of stem you want for the flower.

Deadheading: As soon as blooms are over they should be removed so that the plants energy goes into producing new blooms. Spent blooms can be distinguished from the firmer, more round-shaped buds as they are softer and have a more conical shape – if squeezed they will expel moisture. When deadheading do not remove just the spent head, but cut the stem back down to the buds at the next pair of leaves, or even lower if needed to balance up the plant.

Pests

Slugs and snails – apply ‘Ferramol’ (ferric phosphate) pellets early, i.e. late March. These do not present the dangers of traditional (metaldehyde) pellets and are even suitable for use in organic production.

Attract birds to eat **aphids** and other insect pests.

Deer do not seem to eat dahlias, but can cause damage just by walking through them. However, dahlias are very resilient - just cut off any damaged parts and they will regrow.

Earwigs – munch petals. Put pots stuffed with newspaper or straw upside down on the top of bamboo canes. The earwigs will shelter here and can then be removed.

Blackfly – use [SB Invigorator](#) – when mixing up the spraying solution, put the water in the sprayer first and then add the SB Invigorator to it; putting the SB Invigorator in first will produce an enormous amount of froth.

Red spider mite - SB Invigorator also helps against this – spray weekly.

Wasps can attack stems for nesting material and can even start to build nests there – cut out affected parts.

Capsid bug – sometimes the cause of buds not opening – not very common, mainly in very dry spells – cut out affected part, not just the buds, but the stem down to the next pair of leaves.

Yellow spots on leaves, which then turn brown and drop off. SD invigorator can also help here. Remove affected leaves – make sure that you do not put them in the compost heap or green bin. May be the result of planting too close together.

Mosaic virus – obvious from the yellow mosaic patterning on the foliage – all affected growth and tubers must be removed and incinerated.