

DAHLIA FIELDS

forever

When they burst onto the scene, from midsummer to autumn, these late bloomers put on an unrivaled show. To share their beauty far and wide, an accomplished farmer and florist in the Pacific Northwest grows and propagates rare varieties every year and sends them to select growers across the country. Learn what makes these buds so captivating, and discover a few to brighten your own garden when other flowers are taking a final bow.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY NGOC MINH NGO
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GROWTH FACTORS

Dahlias do best when they're in well-drained soil and get at least six hours of sun a day. Keep them thoroughly watered and mulched to preserve moisture. Stake individual plants or corral them in rows with twine, as shown, to keep the stems upright. If the ground freezes in winter where you live, dig up tubers after the first deep frost, separate the clumps into individuals, and store them in a cool, dry place to plant next spring. Here, Orange 'Beatrice', raspberry 'Sonic Bloom', and coppery 'Hy Suntan' light up Floret Flower Farm.

IF THERE IS A HEAVEN, this is what it would look like,” says farmer and florist Erin Benzakein. She’s describing the sea of dahlias she grows in Washington State’s Skagit Valley, where late-summer days start foggy and cool, with plants covered in dew, and the sunrise seems to sprinkle everything in glitter. “When you’re in the middle of it, everything else fades away.” As she strolls through 93 rows of the plants, harvesting, taking notes, and snapping pictures of specimens, she often comes across bumblebees sleeping right inside the blossoms. That’s the wonder of Floret Flower Farm, a family-run operation focused on seed production, breeding, research, and education that is also a thriving seed-and-bulb business (and a 2014 Martha Stewart American Made winner). Says Benzakein, “We wait all year for this window of time.”

Fifteen years ago, Benzakein was just a novice gardener. One fall day, she helped a friend dig up her tubers, took some home as a gift, and planted them in her vegetable garden the following spring. The sheer abundance and variety of blooms that popped up a few months later blew her away. “Once you grow them and have a bit of success, you’re hooked,” she says.

And once you’re hooked, the sky’s the limit. There are tens of thousands of dahlia cultivars, some as tiny as shooter marbles and others that easily eclipse a dinner plate. Certain plants are so tall, they sway overhead. The flowers can look like water lilies, or daisies, or perfect orbs with petals in mesmerizing symmetry. And their myriad colors are dizzying, ranging from creamy white to deepest burgundy, sometimes within the same blossom. Benzakein grows mother stock of nearly eight hundred different cultivars, and gives tens of thousands of unusual tubers to specialty growers around the country to keep the plants alive and thriving. She also has plans to sell a select group of cultivars she’s bred at floretflowers.com.

Unlike lilacs and peonies, whose petals fade shortly after flowering, dahlias remain vibrant and vigorous until the first frost hits, defiantly outlasting every other bloom around. And all the while, they’re multiplying underground. “That’s what makes them so exciting,” Benzakein says. “You plant one tuber and harvest beautiful flowers from it all season, and then you dig it up and there are more. They’re buried treasure.”



‘CASTLE DRIVE’

HAPPY RETURNS

Above: Before an arrangement workshop, Erin Benzakein conditions blossoms in her studio, clipping stems and removing leaves that go beneath the waterline. Once dahlias start to flower, she suggests picking them regularly and snipping any that have faded so they don’t go to seed. The more you harvest, the more they’ll bloom. **Left:** Five years ago, an anonymous benefactor surprised Benzakein with a shipment of 20 tubers of ‘Castle Drive’, an obscure cultivar she’d spent months trying to locate. After careful nurturing, she is now two thousand plants strong, and shares the tubers with select farmers around the country. “If only one or a few growers have a cultivar, and they lose planting stock, that dahlia could be lost forever,” she says.

STAYING POWER

In this sherbet-hued display, ‘Ferncliff Dolly’, ‘Maya’, and ‘Papageno’ dahlias explode among textural ‘Cascade’ hops, love-in-a-puff vine, mock-orange foliage, and pokeweed. To ensure a long-lasting bouquet, pick dahlias when they’re about three-quarters open, in the mild temperatures of morning or evening. Remove any leaves from the lower halves of the stems, and place them in cool water right away. Let them rest out of the sun for a few hours before arranging. Mix in flower food, and change the water every other day.





'APPLEBLOSSOM'

SHOOTING STARS

Of the hundreds of dahlia cultivars Benzakein grows, these are some of the standouts that still take her breath away. *Left: 'Appleblossom'* has butter-colored petals that encircle golden, open centers and age to pale pink; the plants stand about four feet tall, and the blooms measure about four inches across. *Bottom row, from left: 'Mystique'* features muted raspberry flowers that fade near their petals' edges, making the four-inch blooms look as if they've been touched by frost; the plants stand four to five feet high. The white petals of 'Polka' are brushed with bright cherry and surround fluffy, sunshine-colored centers; these especially long-lasting beauties reach four to six inches on four-foot-tall plants. 'Honka Fragile' resembles a starburst and has unusual white-and-cranberry petals that roll inward; flowers reach two to three inches wide on stems that may stretch to four feet.



'MYSTIQUE'



'POLKA'



'HONKA FRAGILE'



'CAFÉ AU LAIT'

PALE FIRE

This outsize cultivar, known for its ethereal petals and antique shades of blush, light peach, and beige, is beloved by brides, floral designers, and gardeners. 'Café au Lait' blooms reach 8 to 10 inches wide on plants topping out at four to five feet. Visit floretoflowers.com to find out about Benzakein's online workshops (registration should start in late September), and look out for her forthcoming book, *Floret Farm's Discovering Dahlias* (Chronicle Books), to be published in spring.