

Easy-care dahlias add pizzazz to gardens

By Melinda Myers

Plan now for a memorable grand finale in this year's garden. Dahlias are spring-planted bulbs with big, colorful flowers that bloom continuously from midsummer to the first fall frost.

Early in the season, the foliage of these easy-care plants provides a lush green backdrop for nearby annuals and perennials. Then, as many other plants are waning from the summer heat, dahlias burst into bloom, filling the garden with their impressive flowers for months to come.

There are many types of dahlias and many ways to use them. Shorter border dahlias like the Gallery or Melody series are perfect for planting along walkways, in the front of a flower border, or in pots next to the patio. The compact plants support full size flowers for a dazzling display.



Mixes of dahlias create decorative floral arrangements. Photo/Longfield-Gardens

Plant taller varieties in the middle of the flower border, and boost their ornamental appeal by including varieties like Fascination and HS Flame with burgundy foliage. The darker leaves combine nicely with the greens of their neighbors and are the perfect backdrop for the rose-pink and bright red blossoms.

Dahlias dazzle with their many unique flower shapes and sizes. The brilliant color and rolled petals of the cactus dahlia Karma Red Corona are sure to make you stop and take a second look. Or consider the powder puff blooms of Myrtles Folly, with petals that capture the colors of a sunrise. Dinnerplate dahlias, like deep purple Thomas Edison, grow 4 feet tall and have enormous, 8 inch flowers.

Suppliers like Longfield Gardens (longfield-gardens.com) offer dozens of dahlia varieties as well as attractive mixes based on color themes and flower styles. A combination like the Soft Orange mix, works great in the garden and combines nicely in

an arrangement.

Don't be afraid to cut your dahlias. Picking encourages more blooms for you to enjoy. With as few as three to six plants you'll have plenty of flowers to enjoy yourself and share with friends. Since dahlias thrive in the same great soil as vegetables, consider adding a few plants to your food garden as well. You'll be able to cut fresh flowers for the dinner table when harvesting the vegetables for your next meal.

In northern areas where dahlias are not winter hardy, the tubers can be dug and stored indoors for the winter. Or make it easy and just treat your dahlias like other annuals. With so many wonderful varieties to choose from, it's fun to try different ones each year.

Review your garden plans to identify places that could benefit from a burst of late season color. Order your dahlias early for the best selection, plant them in the spring and enjoy a spectacular show.

Melinda Myers has written over 20 gardening books, including Small Space Gardening. She hosts The Great Courses "How to Grow Anything: Food Gardening For Everyone" DVD set and the nationally syndicated "Melinda's Garden Moment" TV and radio program.