

# NATIONAL DAHLIA SOCIETY ANNUAL

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# BUT WAIT, THERE IS MORE

by Keith Hammett, Auckland, New Zealand

Make no mistake, to a large extent I attribute my lifetime career in plant science to the skills I acquired in learning how to grow Dahlias for exhibition.

Recreational horticulture was very popular in the decades immediately following World War II. Many specialist plant societies in Britain can look back on those years as a golden era, when there were many members and much enthusiasm. I was particularly lucky to live in Worcester Park, the home of Pi Ensum of Hamari fame. Many notables from the National Dahlia Society came to shows in Surrey and as a youngster I received much encouragement from them. Not least among these was Derek Hewlett, the best ambassador the NDS ever had. Years later I would meet Derek on visits to the USA and we would reflect on the fact that we were now coming together from opposite ends of the earth and that our mutual interest in the Dahlia had taken us to many different countries.

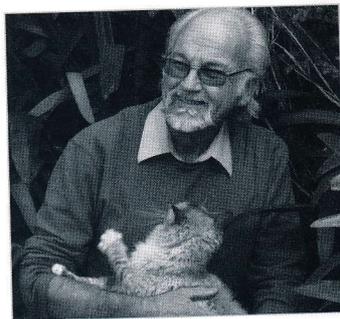
However, things change and our cultural/recreational activities reflect changes in wider society. It is, therefore, important to stand back from time to time to assess what we are doing with any activity, whether it be business or leisure.

It seems to me that with recreational activities involving plants and animals, it must be the inherent beauty of the plant or animal that first attracts us. When societies are formed around a genus or type of plant or animal, they tend to fall into two categories, namely collector societies and sports clubs.

Given the competitive nature of mankind, individuals in the collector societies often seek to amass the largest and most diverse collection possible. While in the sports clubs, individuals seek to grow the "best" possible specimens.

Now, the Dahlia is, in my opinion, the ultimate sports plant. The results directly reflect the effort put into growing and staging blooms. In contrast, there is not a lot that one can do when exhibiting a Camellia or Rhododendron, other than pray that the weather will not be too bad in the days before a show.

The trouble starts though in deciding what is desirable and what is not. Any sport needs a framework of rules to define the activity, plus some kind of measure. In athletics it is stop-watches and tape measures or their digital equivalents. With plants and animals it is written standards.



Dr. Keith Hammett

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This does not mean that the standards are immutable, they drift or at least their interpretation shifts. During the half century or so that I have been involved, I have seen size divisions made silly by allowing latitude at the upper end when exhibiting. Depth of bloom now requires nearly every type of double bloom to be spherical, irrespective of the type of floret, while pole sitting is now seen as a virtue rather than a sin. What we have ended up with is a series of balls on sticks.

One of the greatest virtues of the Dahlia is its sheer diversity, both with regard to shape and colour. Yet when it comes to exhibiting in countries such as the UK, Australia and New colours are deemed to be acceptable. Anything "good for the garden", the biggest put-down of

So where did this obsession with the spherical origin of "florists flowers" a term that originally attracted the attention of enthusiasts. Such interest arose during the Industrial Revolution, (approximately 1760-1850) used to develop new technologies. This was a circle. The circle was considered to be the epitome of perfection.

All florist flowers had to be circular in outline. The anemone, ranunculus, tulip, pink and carnation were accepted, as it was circular. The Sweet Pea flower, despite having been in cultivation for centuries, was not.

Originally, when shown, the only form of Dahlia was called the Ball Dahlia. Blooms were shown on both sides. It might be fully appreciated. There were three other forms.

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No doubt when these are first formulated, some thought is put into defining the parameters that make the specific type of bloom beautiful to the participants at a specific time and place. Look back at earlier editions of the Dahlia Annual and notice how people dressed in different eras. Even today, people in different countries have different ideas regarding clothes, quite divorced from considerations of utility.

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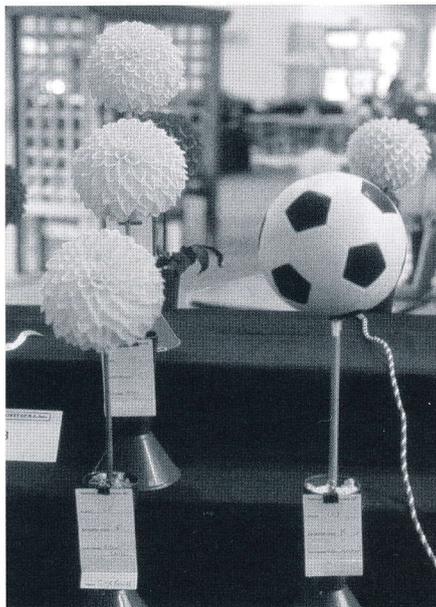
One of the greatest virtues of the Dahlia is its sheer diversity, both with regard to shape and colour. Yet when it comes to exhibiting in countries such as the UK, Australia and New Zealand, only a narrow range of forms and colours are deemed to be acceptable. Anything else is either considered as being rubbish or "good for the garden", the biggest put-down of all.

So where did this obsession with the sphere originate? We have to look back to the origin of "florists flowers" a term that originally meant those flowers which first attracted the attention of enthusiasts. Such interest arose in the Western World around the time of the Industrial Revolution, (approximately 1760-1840) when findings in science were being used to develop new technologies. This was a mechanical age, dominated by wheels and cogs. The circle was considered to be the epitome of aesthetic beauty, "The perfect circle".

All florist flowers had to be circular in outline. They included the auricula, polyanthus, anemone, ranunculus, tulip, pink and carnation. The Dahlia was a latecomer to the list and was accepted, as it was circular. The Sweet Pea in contrast was never accepted as a florist flower, despite having been in cultivation for nearly a full century longer.

Originally, when shown, the only form of Dahlia deemed acceptable was what we today call the Ball Dahlia. Blooms were shown on boards as severed heads so that their circularity might be fully appreciated. There were three consequences of this narrow approach.

First, forms that were later embraced, such as the Cactus and Decorative, were discarded throughout the Nineteen Century.



*Photograph: Dr Keith Hammett*

Second, the thinking of exhibitors became so set and dogmatic that newcomers and new ideas were not made welcome and interest in the activity diminished.

Third, and perhaps most important, because stems were of no consequence on the show bench, it did not matter to exhibitors if cultivars had weak stems and hid their blooms beneath the foliage. However, it did make the Dahlia a poor garden plant and the public turned away from it.

It was only at the very end of the Nineteenth Century and beginning of the Twentieth that a new generation of people came along and developed types such as the Cactus and Decorative forms, which were attractive because of their informality, and contrasted with the extreme formality of the "Show" type of bloom. The irony is that these originally informal forms have been made as formal as the type they superseded. So much so, that in the smaller size ranges, it is now very difficult to determine which is a Ball Dahlia and which is a Decorative. Also important in the revival of interest in the Dahlia among the gardening public, was the development of dwarf, single flowered bedding Dahlias, such as the Coltness strain.

While there may be hot spots of local interest in different countries, now a century later, it has to be admitted that interest in exhibiting Dahlias is waning. There are many possible reasons for this, but essentially we live in a radically different world to that of a hundred or even fifty years ago.

The sheer effort and cost in terms of time and money of producing blooms, in factory like production units, does not fit well with most people's idea of a leisure activity. Equally, the overriding ethos of current culture in the Western World is one of informality. I suspect that, to many modern eyes, exhibition type Dahlias may be seen in the same light as fantastic models made out of matchsticks or old tyres, namely, as aberrations created by talented oddballs.

To me it seems that with the obsession that exhibitors have with pitting their husbandry skills against each other that the Dahlia has been forgotten, other than as a medium. I confess that I had this mindset until I visited Mexico and saw a range of species growing where they had evolved over millions of years. I was struck by their simple beauty, not just in terms of their flowers, but also their foliage.

The genus contains thirty-odd species, yet the hybrid garden Dahlia, that is exhibited is a hybrid between just two species. I acknowledge that occasionally the odd article might appear in English language Dahlia publications detailing a newly described species, but these seem almost as fillers or paying tacit lip service to an area that has no relevance to the average exhibitor. How often do we see a display of Dahlia species at a Dahlia show or in a trial ground?

I in no way want to belittle, erode or diminish the skills needed to produce exhibition Dahlias. As I stated at the start, I owe much to them, but as the title suggests, there are areas of interest in addition to just displaying blooms in vases in a sports context for a very few weeks of the year.

By only displaying highly refined, highly formal blooms on ramrod stems in vases we unwittingly do a number of things. First, to attain such blooms they are most often produced in protected factory like conditions. This places them out of the reach of most home gardeners. Unless they provide similar conditions and put in all the effort needed, they will

be disappointed, even if they grow the ap would rather have an attractive garden, r fixation for much of the year.

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be disappointed, even if they grow the appropriate cultivars. Second, many home owners would rather have an attractive garden, rather than something that looks like a mass crucifixion for much of the year.

Third, while foliage may be attached to the stems in some countries, only in the USA does it form part of the judging process and even there, the reason for requiring foliage to be attached has for most people been lost in the mists of time. Here in New Zealand, leaves are most often removed, which only serves to emphasise the balls on sticks syndrome and draws attention to the ugly packing in the vases.

As I intimated earlier, quite often in the past when Dahlia trials were dominated by exhibitors interested only in spotting the next top prize winner, cultivars not meeting their requirements were damned with faint praise by being described as "good for garden decoration".

The reality is that the attributes needed for a good garden Dahlia are as different from a show Dahlia as those needed by a racehorse compared to those of a pit pony. A garden Dahlia needs to perform well over a long flowering season, here in Northern New Zealand that can be as long as seven months. It needs to be self-supporting and to have a shape that will complement other plants. There is enormous scope for variation with regard to both leaf shape and colour. Dark leaf Dahlias have become increasingly popular with cultivars with finely divided leaves and others with entire leaves. Such plants look good from the time they sprout, till after flowering when the dark seedpods themselves can be an attractive feature.

While a ramrod stem is desirable to hold a large double flower in a vase, in the garden a more pleasing effect can be created by using cultivars with single blooms on strong but wiry stems, which allow the blooms to move in the wind and add life to the garden.

With garden Dahlias we can escape the developmental strait jacket created by show standards. Why should a single bloom always be flat with broad rounded ray florets defining a closed circle? In my experience, in a garden setting, single blooms with pointed and somewhat cupped form are aesthetically more pleasing.

Indeed, why is it that, with the exception of collerette Dahlias, single blooms are seldom exhibited? With singles there is scope to vary the colour of the disc florets as well as the ray florets, while this form offers the best opportunity to display a perfect circle as opposed to a sphere.

Have you noticed that we never discuss the aesthetics of a cultivar? We never have a discussion regarding whether the foliage of a plant is in keeping with the form or colour of the blooms. For other forms of artistic expression, whether it be painting, music or even wine, people discuss such matters. I guess again it is because we look only at the plant through the narrow frame of show bench display.

I could continue at length with this theme. I have not even discussed dwarf bedding types suitable for pot culture yet, nor tree Dahlias. However, I hope I will have caused a few of you to start to question how we might make our shared interest in the Dahlia wider and more embracing of different aspects and with our activity spread over a greater part of the year rather than just concentrated on a very short show season. We do, after all, concern ourselves with a genus that offers a degree of variation surpassed only by the vast orchid family.