



In the pink, Sandra

# DAHLIAS TAKE A BOW

Rich in colour and tone, dahlias will lift any garden. And some of the loveliest are to be found right here in Essex

**WORDS:** Barbara Segall **PHOTOS:** Philippa Burrough

**D**ahlias are having their moment up and down the country – and certainly at Ulting Wick, near Maldon, eight acres owned and created over the past quarter of a century by Philippa Burrough and her husband Bryan.

Here Philippa has created a seasonal showstopper of a garden that bursts into bloom in spring with a collection of bulbs and early season plants, and then in summer it offers a dazzling combination of foliage and flowers that buzz with wildlife and brighten every visitor's heart.

Ulting Wick has a special feel, though, in autumn – one that Philippa attributes to the soft gentle light, falling especially on the large-leaved foliage plants such as the Abyssinian bananas or ensetes, which also work well as a backdrop for the zingy dahlias she loves. Her late-summer aim is to always combine colourful plantings of foliage and flowers to prolong the summer scene, sometimes taking the garden right through to November.

Dahlias are key among the star performing plants at Ulting Wick. They add colour and shape from the flowers and often have dark foliage that works well with other summer perennials.

Philippa's use of dahlias in her summer plantings probably dates back to an event in 2001 when Sarah Raven, then a relatively unknown gardener, gave a talk

at a local charity fund-raising event about creating a cutting garden.

'I'm always on the lookout for new dahlias that will add some extra zip and zing to the late summer show here,' says Philippa, who nowadays keeps an eye on social media platforms such as Instagram and X for inspiration, since many gardeners post images of their latest best-performing or favourite dahlias here.

Philippa is clear about the colours and shapes she prefers. 'I love dahlias with deep intense colours. I don't like muddled colours, nor am I mad about multi-coloured ones. The fashion for large dinner-plate dahlias has also passed me by. They are too large and blowsy and just don't hold up well enough.

'I like simple flowers, such as those in the 'Happy Single' series; 'Ethereal' is another simple, single-flowered dahlia that appeals to me.'

But it is the neat pom-pom dahlias with their precise symmetry that she favours. 'Brown Sugar' is one that is top of the list currently, with its autumnal colour.

'I do grow dahlias with other shapes but it is the uniformity and pleasing neat shapes of the pom-poms that seem to work well in this garden, especially against the riotous setting of the tropical foliage throughout the garden at this time of year.'



The simplicity of the single-flowered  
Ethereal dahlia appeals to Philippa



Dahlias at Ulting Wick

The pom-pom *Dahlia* 'Zundert Mystery Fox' is a warm orange colour and *Dahlia* 'Cornel', a red form, are two that Philippa particularly recommends.

'When I get tubers of a new-to-me dahlia I usually grow them in the cutting garden beds for their first year [to trial them out]. I find that often the colours in the images of them aren't always true and sometimes the original suppliers haven't labelled them correctly.'

This is a lesson learnt the hard way – in previous years she discovered too late that the colour as described, is, in reality, not right for her chosen combination.

'My solution is always to grow new plants of particular dahlia either in pots or in another part of the garden where colour may not be so crucial, to see if in fact they are the plant ordered. There have been occasions when I've had to cut flowers off if they're not what I chose.'

### DAHLIA REGIME

For dahlias to be at their best over a long period in late summer, deadheading is one of the absolute essentials.

'I am meticulous about deadheading,' says Philippa. 'I cannot stand seeing a garden where there are spent flowers on a plant.'

'I go out on a daily basis with secateurs and a bucket, snipping them off. It also means that the flower show keeps on going for a longer period.'

She's equally attentive when it comes to ensuring her dahlias are upstanding. 'There is nothing worse than seeing dahlias flopping over onto neighbouring plants – it's one of my pet hates.'

'These are key plants for colour from late-summer through until the first frosts, so they need to be staked and kept upright.'

'I use hazel coppiced in our wood and string to support them. It looks a little like a fortress for a while, but they grow so well that in no time you can't see the string or the hazel sticks.'

In Philippa's two-season garden there isn't time to wait for the first frosts, which, with climate change, are getting later. In mid-October, though, most of the tender

## GROWING FOR SHOWS

Matt Oliver, a professional horticulturist and exhibition dahlia grower is the head gardener at Ulting Wick.

As I write, he's aiming to take his collection of dahlias in several classifications to one or two of the Essex Dahlia

shows this year. For show-growers like Matt, perfection of flowering is the key to success and controlling every aspect of the plant's life is the regime. Feeding, watering, staking and choosing the best blooms is the way forward for his

dahlias, which he grows on a local allotment.

In previous years Matt has had success with 'Dave's Choice' a miniature ball dahlia and also with 'Josudi Hercules', which is a miniature cactus dahlia in terracotta brick red.





Dahlias growing to a very careful regime in Matt Oliver's allotment

plants are lifted out of their summer quarters and taken under cover and the process of planting up the bulbs and spring flowering plants begins again.

Philippa does leave some dahlias in the ground in parts of the garden, including the pathway bed and the pink garden bed, as these are relatively sheltered and not majorly disturbed with new plantings.

For those that aren't staying in beds, what is the process for dahlia lifting?

'We cut them back, lift them and label them, then cut them back to just a couple of inches of stalk and place them upside down on wooden crates to dry,' she explains. 'Once they're dry it's easy to brush off any soil with a soft brush. If you decide you want to divide a tuber clump, compress them and you'll find that they open out and you can split them easily.'

'We replot the dahlias in November, or at least before Christmas. Some people do this in spring but I find there is less going on in autumn and it good to get this done as early as possible, so they can spend the winter in a frost-free site. In early February we wake them up with watering and pinch them out once there are three sets of leaves.'

From April onwards the dahlias hardened off – toughened up to carry on growing. Philippa thinks that if they are growing well, they don't get badly attacked by slugs and snails, as they are tougher. She also keeps an eye on the weather and has plenty of old fleece to draft

into action to wrap over the plants if a frost is forecast. In early June they are in their flowering positions and getting ready to start powering up to the late summer finale. A dahlia that Philippa is particularly pleased to have is 'Autumn Orange', which she has been seeking out for many years. This one came from a Suffolk supplier, Riverside Bulbs. Philippa is awaiting its blooming with keen anticipation. ●

**Ulting Wick is open by appointment for groups of 15 to 50 people until October 1.**

**Check NGS for details: [ngs.org.uk](http://ngs.org.uk)**

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## PHILIPPA'S PREFERRED DAHLIA SUPPLIERS

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Here are some of Philippa's favourites – though she sometimes buys on impulse from garden centres, especially if there are colours and shapes that appeal to her and they are missing from her main orders.

Rose Cottage Plants, Epping Green: [rosecottageplants.co.uk](http://rosecottageplants.co.uk)

Riverside Bulbs, Monks Eleigh, Suffolk: [riversidebulbs.co.uk](http://riversidebulbs.co.uk)

Taylor's Bulbs, Holbeach, Norfolk: [taylor's-bulbs.com](http://taylor's-bulbs.com)

Peter Nyssen Manchester, [peternyssen.com](http://peternyssen.com)