



The eye-popping tones of *Dahlia* 'HS Wink' are complemented by a skirt of petunias tumbling over a 35cm (14in) diameter black ceramic pot. Below, cool shade-tolerant begonias dance over brushwood supports.

- ✦ *Dahlia* Happy Single Wink ('HS Wink')
- ✦ *Begonia* Summerwings White ('Innbolwhi')
- ✦ *Petunia* Supertunia Pretty Much Picasso ('Bhtun31501')

# Dahlias with

Among the most versatile and varied of summer can successfully integrate dahlias into spectacular

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A harmonious mingling of red, orange and apricot tones set against dark foliage keeps summer alive whatever the weather. The dahlia, lantana and calibrachoa provide floral continuity, while the helenium contributes a summer highlight.

- ✦ *Dahlia* 'Dream Seeker'
- ✦ *Helenium* 'Mardi Gras'
- ✦ *Lantana camara*
- ✦ *Calibrachoa* MiniFamous Apricot Red Eye ('Kleca06124')

# potted power

flowers, with some skill and careful selection you displays that will last until the first frosts of autumn.

writer and horticultural consultant



‘Dahlias spell excitement and we can all do with some of that in our lives’, observed the late plantsman

Christopher Lloyd of these hitherto much-maligned plants. Fashionable again with gardeners seeing them afresh, these versatile flowers can be used creatively for late-season impact. While growing them in borders is generally easy, which do you use for pots? Many traditional Cactus, Collerette or Pompon cultivars are dismissed as being too large and unwieldy, although some, with a little trimming and support, (see box, p61) can be massed with other ornamentals for sumptuous displays in large containers.

In recent years a slew of new compact selections, taking popular characteristics such as single or Collerette-style flowers and dark foliage, has become available, opening new avenues of use. Blooms in multi-hued tones are produced in long succession, lighting up the patio from early summer to late autumn, providing superb value for money. Single dahlias can be valuable for wildlife too, making good nectar and pollen plants for bees and butterflies.

## Establishing dahlias

For potted displays, you can source dahlias in various ways. For small pots or low, massed displays, raise bedding dahlias as annuals from seed sown in spring. Most perennial dahlias are bought either as dry tubers or, from seed merchants and specialist growers, as small cutting-raised plants available from early spring.

Winchester Growers of Cornwall (holder of the National Plant Collection of *Dahlia* with more than 1,500 species and cultivars) sell many as cuttings. You grow these on to fill 12.5cm (5in) pots before planting out. Dwarf cultivars are also available as flowering plants in garden centres from early summer. >> 62



◀ Collerette dahlias have a charm of their own; the distinctive inner ring of small quilled petals (see inset, below far left) often has contrasting colours. With the lower leaves of *Dahlia* ‘Pat Knight’ removed (left), the sumptuous display beneath reflects the tones of the dahlia flowers. The large, boldly coloured leaves of *Solenostemon* (syn. *Coleus*) add visual weight, while golden *Zinnia* and purple *Scabiosa* add frothy accents. A tall display in a narrow-based pot like this requires shelter from strong winds and the dahlia needs to be strongly staked and tied.

- ✦ *Dahlia* ‘Pat Knight’
- ✦ *Scabiosa* ‘Barocca’
- ✦ *Solenostemon* Kong Series
- ✦ *Zinnia* ‘Zahara Yellow’



◀ Many shade-loving perennials make useful ground cover for dahlias, but perhaps the new cultivars of *Heuchera* and *x Heucherella* are among the best. Their leaves come in such a bewildering range of tones from startling yellow to dark obsidian, some splashed or veined in other colours. Wand-like flowers offer an additional bonus. Here the bright flowers of the dahlia contrast with the matching ensemble of dark and coppery leaves and metallic bronze pot.

- ✦ *Dahlia* Happy Single Date (‘HS Date’)
- ✦ *x Heucherella* ‘Sweet Tea’



▶ Mimicking a bonfire, dark *Pennisetum* grass is topped by dahlias of various heights. Sparks are from 2.4m (8ft) pink and red peony-flowered *Dahlia* ‘Eos’, flames by red and yellow Cactus *Dahlia* ‘Karma Bon Bini’ and dazzling *Zinnia*. A clambering skirt of golden bidens and *Begonia* Inferno Series is ablaze all season.

- ✦ *Dahlia* ‘Eos’
- ✦ *Dahlia* ‘Karma Bon Bini’
- ✦ *Pennisetum glaucum* ‘Purple Baron’
- ✦ *Zinnia* ‘Swizzle Scarlet and Yellow’
- ✦ *Begonia* Inferno Series
- ✦ *Bidens ferulifolia* ‘Golden Eye’



June



August

▶ A chunky 60cm (24in) urn carries 2.1m (7ft) tall red *Dahlia* ‘Tartarus’, married with a seed-raised *Amaranthus*. Threaded through lower *Dahlia* ‘Bishop of York’, the fine leaves of the shade-tolerant sedge (*Carex*) create an elegant and lasting cascade.

- ✦ *Dahlia* ‘Tartarus’
- ✦ *Dahlia* ‘Bishop of York’
- ✦ *Amaranthus cruentus* Autumn Palette Group
- ✦ *Carex buchananii*

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## Dahlias for pots

## Maintaining dahlias for pot displays

As they are vigorous, dahlias need careful control and restraint, especially when combined with other ornamentals. Pruning back foliage and staking plants are essential steps to success.

✦ **Pruning:** fast-expanding foliage casts dense shade, affecting companion planting. As a routine, shorten lower leaves by half; later selectively removing some altogether, leaving stem bases bare, to allow more light to reach the underplanting.

✦ **Training:** support weak-stemmed and tall dahlias to prevent them collapsing, especially in windy weather. Stout cane supports will be needed for larger dahlias, thinner canes or brushwood for slender types. Tie in stems as they lengthen. Snip off any spent flowerheads to encourage more to form and also to help stabilise taller plants.

✦ **Watering and feeding:** keep plants moist, especially the underplanting and around pot margins. In hot or windy weather pots may require watering twice daily. Feed with high-potash liquid fertiliser once or twice a week, from when flowers form to season’s end.



PHOTOGRAPHY: RUS / JTM SANDAL AND NEIL HEPMORTH



## Dahlias for pots

Establish dry tubers in 12.5–15cm (5–6in) pots of peat-free compost in spring. Plant in final positions 10–15cm (4–6in) deep (cuttings and seed-raised stock at soil level). Ensure all plants are hardened off before placing outdoors at the end of May. Pots or half barrels 60cm (24in) across will accommodate three medium-sized dahlias, perhaps with a taller cultivar in the centre. Position bedding plants around these, taller plants in the centre, trailing to the outside.

### Good associates

What to plant with dahlias will depend on the size of pot and the type and number of dahlias used. Although some are cut-leaved, most dahlias produce prodigious amounts of dense foliage which will need either thinning or removing (see panel, p61). Planting partners need to be either tall and leggy to flower above the dahlias, such as cosmos, amaranthus and gaura, or be shade-tolerant clamberers that grow into light-filled gaps. These include bidens, variegated ground ivy (*Glechoma hederacea* 'Variegata'), silvery

*Dichondra*, and the new hybrid trailing begonias, such as 'Inferno', which flower all season and are ideal for the purpose. Hardy, shade-tolerant ground cover can also be used, such as *Heuchera*, x *Heucherella*, trailing geraniums and sedges such as *Carex*. At the end of the season remove the dahlia tubers, trim off old stems and keep dry and frost free over winter. The tubers can be planted for several years and used to raise fresh cuttings.

Such rich diversity ensures a dahlia for all tastes and situations. Whether you choose small or large, or prefer modesty to adventure, take a tip from Christopher Lloyd: succumb to temptation and revel in their magnificence. ●

### More from the RHS

The 2012 *Dahlia* Trial on the Trials Field, RHS Garden Wisley will be planted out late May/early June and will include a number of smaller, container-grown entries.

✦ For recent Award of Garden Merit (AGM) dahlias for containers, visit 'Latest issue' at [www.rhs.org.uk/thegarden](http://www.rhs.org.uk/thegarden).

✦ For Graham Rice's top ten AGM dahlias, search 'AGM dahlias' at [www.rhs.org.uk](http://www.rhs.org.uk)

◀ Bicoloured Colletterte *Dahlia* 'Danum Torch' combines with dainty *Dahlia* 'Ossie Latham' to striking effect; both are fine choices for pots. Superb *Begonia* 'Glowing Embers' contributes an orange highlight over dark foliage, while a tumbling yellow-flowered loosestrife cascades over the side.

- ✦ *Dahlia* 'Danum Torch'
- ✦ *Dahlia* 'Ossie Latham'
- ✦ *Begonia* 'Glowing Embers'
- ✦ *Lysimachia congestiflora* 'Midnight Sun'

### SUPPLIERS

Most of the dahlias mentioned are available from:

- ✦ **Winchester Growers**, Cornwall TR20 8AQ; 01962 844307; [www.national-dahlia-collection.co.uk](http://www.national-dahlia-collection.co.uk)
- ✦ **Thompson & Morgan** ('Eos' and 'Tartarus' part of Sky High Series); [www.thompson-morgan.com](http://www.thompson-morgan.com); 0844 248 5383.
- ✦ **J Parker Dutch Bulbs**; 0161 848 1100; [www.jparkers.co.uk](http://www.jparkers.co.uk)

## Six more dahlias to try in pots

These winsome plants will add pizzazz to your containers, whether you are looking for something petite or a little more sumptuous



### 'Gallery Art Deco'

A distinctive low dahlia 38–60cm (15–24in) tall. Tousled orange petals have ruby reverses creating a scintillating effect, against dark green foliage.

### 'Dark Desire'

This 60cm (24in) dahlia has open, filigree foliage making it ideal for mixed plantings. The elegant flowers and bronze leaves are great both with bright or pale tones.



### 'Cherubino'

This attractive Colletterte dahlia has fresh green foliage. Reaching 1m (39in), it needs staking but is good in large pots used with stronger colours, or on its own.

### 'Candy Eyes' ('Zone Ten')

Charming pink-striped flowers of this selection float over dark dissected foliage. Sturdy and growing to 75cm (30in) it is good for mass displays.



### 'Roxy'

Iridescent pink flowers of this 60cm (24in) dahlia are almost hypnotic in effect. Use on its own or with flowers of soft shades, such as pale pink *Gaura* and white petunias.

### 'David Howard'

The soft, burnt-orange flowers have a perfect foil in the dark, bronzy foliage. Taller at 1m (39in), this is ideal for larger pots and will flower riotously all summer long.

