

One aspect I enjoy about my work is I never stop learning. I write my horticulture column with the purpose to help others learn, but frankly, while doing so, I've discovered I often learn as much or more than my readers. It all has to do with the topic. When selecting a topic, I generally focus on a timely gardening task and usually on a subject matter for which I have been trained or possess a certain degree of practical working knowledge. As a horticulturist, I am supposed to be an expert in the science of cultivating ornamental plants including flowers, trees, shrubs, fruits and vegetables. Long ago, I realized I am far from an expert. I'll admit that my formal training and years of experience have helped me hone my craft, but time and time again, I learn from others with whom I come in contact. Occasionally, I write about a subject matter I know little about. Such is the case with this week's story.



Last week, I received a call asking if I would stop by a home and examine a lawn and an ailing tree. Later that morning, I met with Lloyd and Marge Trew at 413 East 33rd. While examining their turf and tree, I couldn't help but notice the beautiful flowers blooming throughout their backyard.

Scattered about were numerous rose and hibiscus shrubs along with an assortment of other colorful flowers. One particular flower bed captured my interest. It was a dahlia bed.

In Nebraska, dahlias are grown as an annual from bulb-like structures called tubers. These colorful, spiky flowers generally bloom from midsummer to first frost. They range in size from giant "dinner plate" blooms, ten inches in diameter, to two-inch "lollipop styles". Most varieties grow 4 to 5 feet tall. They prefer full sun and do best if grown in an area protected from the wind. Dahlias are heavy feeders and thrive in humus-rich, well-drained soil. They can be carried over for the winter if the tubers are lifted in the fall and safely stored. Dahlias make great cut flowers.



Marge Trew and 'Jersey's Beauty' 1923 dahlia

Over the years, I have attempted to grow dahlias but, unfortunately, with little success. Having witnessed these beautiful dahlias, I quickly realized this was my opportunity to learn. Marge is the master gardener of this delightful dahlia bed. With her permission, I began questioning her on the secrets of her success.

“With so many flowering plants from which to choose, when and how did you get started growing dahlias?”

I asked.

She responded, “I’ve been growing dahlias for nearly twenty-five years, and I credit my mother for my inspiration.” Marge’s mother lived to 101 years of age, and until her death, she grew dahlias and frequently entered them in the Custer County Fair. “For years, I always helped Mother with her flowers,” cited Marge. Through her mother’s guidance, reading books, and by trial and error, Marge has become an expert dahlia grower. The attached photos certainly validate her title.



'Mrs. I De Ver Warner' 1920 dahlia

I asked Marge what key tips she would recommend regarding the care of dahlias. When it comes to saving the tubers over winter, she shared the following:

- ✓ Be very careful not to injure the tubers when digging them in the fall. Wash them thoroughly and cure them in the sun for a day or two, making sure they are thoroughly dry before storing.
- ✓ Dust the tubers with a good fungicide/insecticide before placing them in open plastic bags filled with sawdust.
- ✓ Store them in an area that does not freeze. A temperature around 45 to 50 °F. works best.
- ✓ Don’t forget to label them before storing.

✓ Check on tubers periodically, misting with water if they exhibit excessive shriveling.

Marge begins planting about mid-May after the tulips have faded, and by mid-July, her dahlias are blooming and continue blooming until frost. During that time and throughout the growing season, she waters, fertilizes and dead-heads her plants on a regular basis. “I can’t emphasize enough how important it is to properly stake dahlias,” remarked Marge. Because of their gigantic size and height, she supports hers by tying the plants with strips of nylon stocking to heavy-duty tomato cages and durable metal trellises. It’s obvious Marge loves them all, but her favorite dahlia is ‘*Jersey’s Beauty*’ an old variety that dates back to 1923.



As I began, one aspect I enjoy about my work is I never stop learning. I thank you Marge Trew for sharing with me your secrets on how to grow successfully beautiful dahlias.

