

Tales from the Greenhouse, #5

History Through a Horticultural Lens

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What does a Dahlia mean to You?

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The gardens of Glen Magna Farms have officially transitioned to summer. An early June ritual of planting dahlias takes place each year in the Chamberlain Garden. This ritual has always been done with the utmost care, for each of these dahlias are unique not just for their beauty, but also for the stories they share. Dahlias, when grown correctly, can also be a sustainable garden practice for the eco-friendly gardener. The thoughtful placement and selection of dahlias can add so much value, not just to the Chamberlain Garden, but to your garden too.

Today's horticulturist is faced with a different set of circumstances and challenges. Sustainability, environmental degradation, the economy and invasive species are problems each horticulturist must confront. Most gardeners are well aware of the carbon footprint of trying to grow annuals in New England. Annuals can be expensive, labor intensive and heart breaking when you must dig them up only to toss them away into the compost pile each fall. Dahlias hit that sweet spot of giving you the showiness and long bloom time of an annual, yet the sustainability of a perennial. Although dahlias are not cold hardy in New England, they can be dug up after the first hard New England frost and stored in a basement. Then in early spring, they can be divided and planted all over again.




Besides being more sustainable than annuals, dahlias are great storytellers. The Chamberlain Garden was created in 1889 by Joseph Chamberlain, husband of Mary Endicott. The garden is very much the same as it was when Joseph and Mary strolled the grounds on their summer holidays from England. Sometimes while gardening, I meditate on the gardeners who came before me. How the same paths have been hand edged for over 133 years. In 1926, Ellen Endicott received the Hunnewell Gold Medal from the Massachusetts Horticultural society for the prestigious gardens of Glen Magna Farms. In the 21st century, how does one pay tribute and honor such a legacy? I feel dahlias can play an important role in sharing these stories. Only heirloom dahlias are grown in the Chamberlain Garden and each one has a story to tell, giving honor to a particular time period of Glen Magna Farms. This year, a beautiful dahlia called 'Thomas Edison' was selected to be grown in the garden. Named after the American inventor, it was first cultivated in the 1920s and has been growing strong ever since. The 'Thomas Edison' dahlia is meant to pay tribute to the 1920s Glen Magna Farms landscape as well as Ellen Endicott winning the gold medal award in 1926. Another purple dahlia called 'Requiem' was developed in the 1950s and its selection for the garden is meant to honor Louis Endicott, who passed away in 1958 at the age of 98.

Dahlias have another story to tell that goes far beyond the garden walls of Glen Magna Farms. The dahlia we know and love today can trace its roots all the way back to the forested mountains of Mexico and Guatemala. The Mexica (commonly known as the Aztecs, a name given to them by the Spanish conquerors) called them Acōcōtli. The dahlia or ācōcōtli, looked very different from the flowers that we now grow in our gardens today. These original dahlias with their simple, elegant flowers growing along



the sides of mountains reached twenty feet or higher. Its long canes were used by the Mexica and other indigenous people to carry and transport water. In 15th century, conquistadors backed by the king of Spain set off on a voyage to discover new resources in the “new world.” The Spanish took many dahlia seeds back to Spain along with the many riches they exploited from the Americas. These interactions between the Spanish and Mexica meant the collapse of the Mexica’s empire and certain doom for the many indigenous people in Central and South America. If we fast forward to the 18th century, we start to see horticulturists at the Royal Botanical Gardens in Madrid turning out hundreds of hybrids of dahlias that start to resemble the dahlias we grow today. It was not until the late 19th century when over 50,000 named varieties of dahlias were cultivated, solidifying in our minds what we believe a dahlia to be today. While planting dahlias in the garden, my mind sometimes wanders to the indigenous people of Central America and the great Mexica Empire. What did ācōcōtli mean to them? It’s theorized that these plants could have been used as medicine or in religious practices.



This summer I invite you to witness the dahlias growing in Glen Magna Farms. While walking the garden paths keep in mind this question, “what does a dahlia mean to you”? Perhaps the answers to this question are as numerous as petals on a dahlia flower. A flower can be a lens into the past and a tool to connect us to our sense of place. Can you see the whole world in a single flower? 

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