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Juliotter Garden Club Newsletter

For everyone in North Cornwall who loves gardens and gardening

Dahlias

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I'd never thought about growing dahlias from seed until Ian Clemens came to talk to us last year. Truth to tell, I'd rather given up on growing dahlias at all. For a start, the tubers were expensive; they took their time to sprout new leaves; and then they seemed to prove irresistible to slugs and snails. In autumn you had to lift them, wrap them carefully and store over winter somewhere cool and dry. And when spring came, all those fat tubers were shrivelled and useless. Results of sowing dahlia seeds can be variable—because of open germination you might not get exactly what you were hoping for, but the results can be exciting. So Ian assured us that yes, you could grow them from seed and he gave me a handful to give it a go. Well, dahlia seeds are large, so they are easily handled. To my surprise, most of them germinated; they produced strong little plants, and it's a novel, relatively easy and economical way to grow a great number of plants. You can order seeds from a number of suppliers, or collect your own at season's end. The plants I have grown this year are from a packet by Sarah Raven – mainly single cactus form with star petals and I am delighted with them. Once they got going this year they formed a generous and colourful display against a background of delicate cosmos Purity. and I shall certainly be doing it again next year. I am not going to lift the tubers, although I might well mulch them – they are so cheap they can take their chances. And if they do survive what we are promised will be a wild wet autumn and winter, I shall steal a march and have early flowers next summer. But I'll still start a packet of dahlia seed under cover, four to eight weeks before the anticipated final frost. I like to sow into small individual cells, two seeds to a cell, and lightly cover with sieved compost. Moisten thoroughly and place trays in a warm, bright spot. Temperatures between 18-24°C, or a heat mat to help promote germination. Expect to see shoots in 7 to 10 days or within two weeks as they spring up intermittently. When seedlings reach a few inches tall with a couple of pairs of true leaves, pot on to larger, individual pots. Wait to transplant them until a few weeks after the final frost, when temperatures are consistently warming. treat them as you would a tomato plant. Watch for slugs and snails in the early days as they prefer tender new shoots, but once well into growth I've had no trouble, not even with earwigs. Dahlias need consistent moisture and regular water throughout the growing season, usually once or twice weekly. However, they won't tolerate wet feet. Dahlias grow quickly and use a lot of energy to produce their outstanding display. Nutrient-rich soils ensure health and vigour all season long. To boost nutrition, use an all-purpose organic fertilizer shortly after planting and then monthly until mid-August, when growth slows. Dahlias benefit from light pruning and pinching as they grow to encourage side branching. Removing the growth tip from young plants promotes a bushier form with a leafier, less leggy habit. It also creates more stems for more buds and blooms. Pinch off the growing tip when plants reach 12 inches tall with three or four pairs of leaves. Regular deadheading promotes flowering, with less energy going into seed production. You will be rewarded with an abundant display of flowers which are also, of course, wonderful for cutting for the house. What more can I say? I used to love the old autumn joke: the dahlias are all dead—hooray! But I've gone from positive distaste to a devoted admirer in one season. But that's gardening for you – do it for long enough and it will teach you all the lessons of life itself.

- Juliotter Garden Club meets on the fourth Tuesday of the month
- Otterham Village Hall at 7.30 p.m.
- New members and guests of members are made very welcome
- We have a full programme of events and talks throughout the year

Julie Otter

Planting for Spring

For those of us looking ahead to the first snowdrops, now is the time to start thinking about getting some spring bulbs in the ground. I like the naturalistic look so my method is to throw a handful of bulbs in the air and just plant them where they land, but if you like a tidier, more formal look the trick is to mark out your design on the earth with a line of fine sand before you plant. Daffodils and crocus benefit from early autumn planting, while tulips prefer deep planting later in November – this helps to reduce the risk of diseases such as tulip fire. Amongst the first to get in the ground now I'd go for crocus – the dark blues go really well with early daffodils. I used to buy the species crocus but lately I've bought Dutch bulbs—they are larger, stand taller and seem more robust in the Cornish climate. As well as the border crocus are spectacular in grass. When planting in grass, you need generous drifts to make an impact so plant in groups and (top tip) buy an extra packet. If you want scent in spring, the hyacinth is the bulb to go for and they come in every shade, from white and yellow, to cream, pink and purple. Often grown in special glass containers in time for Christmas, their glorious perfume fills the house. Of course, there are also plenty of scented daffodils which are ideal for planting in pots or near a window, where you can inhale their sweet aroma. I usually go for the little wild native daffodil (*narcissus pseudonarcissus*) outside in the wild flower meadow, as it doesn't get blown over by those March gales. It naturalises freely and soon bulks up to make a grand spring display. Bulbs which do well in light or dappled shade, such as under deciduous trees include snowdrops, which flower early, before the tree canopy fills in, bluebells, wood anemones and chionodoxa. Like snowdrops and crocuses, you'll need to plant a lot of chionodoxa bulbs to make an impact, but these early-flowering candidates naturalise brilliantly



in lawns and under trees. For something that looks delicate but is pretty tough, *Iris reticulata* 'Blue Planet' is perfect to plant in containers, in all its soft blue glory. Grape hyacinths (*muscaria*) are also brilliant for pots, especially if one variety fills the whole container, whether blue, white or graduating in colour – but they are invasive so a pot is exactly the right home for them. Also known as wild hyacinth, camassias are classically known for their tall spires of blue flowers, although you can also get white and pink varieties and in my garden the white varieties last longer in flower – but they are later flowering than other spring bulbs. They will also grow in heavy, damp soil unlike many other bulbs. Best planted en masse as you would bluebells, they will also naturalise well. A reliable variety is *Camassia leichtlinii* *Caerulea*, which grows to 75cm. My favourite suppliers include the always reliable Peter Nyssen, Sarah Raven, De Jager and Bloms Bulbs.

Club Notices

Mark Wash came to talk to us in August about his award-winning *crococsmia* varieties. He spoke knowledgeably about their home habitat in South Africa. Mark was first attracted to *crococsmias* by their fiery colours at a time when pastels were in fashion, and as his collection expanded, he visited the Eastern Cape of South Africa to see how they grew in the wild, managing to track down some unusual and rare varieties. *Crococsmia* favour the edges of valleys by little streams, and he went on to describe the important varieties. They extend the season with bright colour providing great food for pollinators. The leaves and seed heads are also very attractive. They like sun for half a day to flower well. They don't mind wind and rabbits don't eat them. Dig a deep hole, the coms like to be deep, compost, feed and mulch. Cut back in Autumn and feed in Spring. Divide them every 3 years remembering that the top corm is the best. We're going to hear the story of the Cornish Cabbage Plant Company at our next meeting on 22nd September. Established in 1924, they specialise in growing old fashioned traditional and heritage varieties in the field, so that the plants are not only strong and acclimatised, but will crop over a longer period than greenhouse varieties grown in cells. When my seedlings grow sickly and fail to thrive, when I simply forget to sow in time, it's good to know that there's a local company always ready to fill the shortfall. The talk should be interesting. Put 22nd in your diary, 7.30 pm Otterham & St Juliot Village Hall.

Contact Details

Chair: Claire Hewlett—clairehewlett@btinternet.com

Newsletter: Pat Thorne—pat@tregrylls.co.uk

Secretary (Minutes): Harriet Halstead—halsteadace@gmail.com

Events & Speakers: Sue Kittle—sue.kittle@yahoo.com

Treasurer: Moses Andrew—moses.mary.andrew@btinternet.com