



Fig No 12.

LIQUID FEEDING

At the end of July I would start to liquid feed with Phostrogen at a rate of one scoop to one gallon of water, which is twice the recommended rate, and one gallon of water was given to each plant twice a week. Phostrogen which is high in potash will harden the stems gradually, but does not affect the size of the blooms, but does restrict the height of the plants giving a good stem to hold the giant blooms. This process would take me two nights to complete the garden at Oakley Road and with other plots it was a full time job. The plants were now tied in with the use of brown Phyllis giving support where needed.

At this time the dahlia would make a lot of root with only a slight amount of top growth. At the end of June a straw mulch was applied on the whole plot, and anything up to twenty five bales of straw was used. (See Fig11) This was spread to a depth of twelve inches and would compact down on the paths to around two to three inches each year. From this point the straw needs to be kept damp at all times, not only because it produces feeder roots to grow under the straw but it also prevents any risk of fire as there has been more than one dahlia grower's garden that has gone up in flames from a careless cigarette end.



Fig No 13.



Fig No 14

The first blooms which will flower come from branches from the top of the plant and the last to flower come from the bottom. There could be five pairs of leaves giving ten branches. According to the variety you would always work from the top of the plant and end up with four breaks alternately to give you a balanced plant. All the others would be removed gradually over the month. The aim is to be seeing buds in the breaks left in late July, according to the varieties. Any surplus growth other than the breaks are removed but not the leaves.

DE-BRANCHING

With the straw mulched down the dahlias make more growth in July than at any other time. Up until this point you could have been growing any type of dahlia. During the month of July I would start to de-branch the plants which is another step in timing when the blooms would flower. A dahlia plant produces shoots from the leaf axle and are at 90 degrees to each other and when de-branching the aim is to end up with a balanced plant



Fig No 15.



Fig No 16.

the left hand bud allowed to flower, and the right hand bud removed. This would delay flowering by seven days. You could also delay flowering by removing the central and the left-hand bud and allowing the right hand bud to mature. If you look closely, this right hand bud also has a pair of leaves which, if allowed to develop for around fourteen days would end up looking identical to fig.12, again and the process could be repeated, the only difference being that the plant would be taller.

BUD SECURING

Securing the bud : Fig.12, is the biggest factor in the timing of the dahlia and it is done when the bud is the size of a pea. It will then take from thirty six days down to twenty five days for the bloom to fully develop. Again the times quoted are for Lula Pattie, the longest, and Hamari Girl, the shortest. On fig.12 the main central bud is approximately the right size and would be the one to leave to flower, and the other two side shoots would be removed. If at this stage the development was too early, the central bud could be removed ,



Fig No 17.

SPRAYING REGIME

A spraying regime needs to be maintained throughout the whole time the dahlias are growing to prevent aphids, caterpillars and earwigs attacking the plants. Slug bait should be applied round the young plants when planting out. With the buds secured and the plants debranched down to four you are now committed to when the dahlias will flower. The top break will flower first, and so-on down, with a couple of days difference between them. As the buds develop I would inspect them to see if they were round. On finding an oval one you should remove that branch as soon as possible leaving the three to flower. are equally spaced as they do not grow naturally like this, but are tied on to canes to hold them separate. At this time a split cane is applied to each stem to help support the bloom, both while on the plant and in transit to the shows. It can also be used to correct the angle of the bud by the use of a cotton wool pad being placed under the bud, so that the angle of the bud is between 45 and 90 degrees, so preventing the bloom becoming clock-faced, and possibly oval. Use split canes for this method and a six-inch twist-it to secure the cotton-wool pad, then place immediately under the bud, and under the first pair of leaves. The third tie lower down. Each day as the plant develops the split cane needs to be pushed upwards maintaining pressure on the bud. This takes a lot of practise as I have taken many a bud off the stem by the split cane. This is best done when the bud is beginning showing colour. If left to when it begins to open, the stems will have hardened making it impossible to move the bud. Some varieties send up shoots from the bottom of the plant, called by the Americans 'water-shoots', these normally produce excellent blooms, but the timing of them is very difficult. They especially do well on the three varieties, Hamari Girl, Kidd's Climax and it's sport Almand's Climax but it can occur on all other varieties. Some of the best blooms I have produced have come from these shoots.

When to cover the dahlias? It is essential to protect the blooms from the elements, in order to produce top exhibition dahlias. There are two main methods to do this; one is to cover the whole plot as seen earlier in the book, the second to cover individual blooms, which is time consuming. I actually did both and covered individual blooms under the main covers by various methods, as seen in figures 13 and 14. I used eighteen inch diameter washing-up bowls and also tomato boxes, as well as umbrellas. These methods also prevent the blooms being bleached by the sun, especially red varieties, i.e. Jocondo and Night Editor.

Fog.16: Shows a method used by Derek Hewlett who made Dunces' hats and covered his Giant's individually in this way. Each hat was marked to indicate the date the hat was applied, to indicate when the bloom would be ready to cut. No doubt there are lots of other methods that could be applied equally successfully, including growing under expensive plastic tunnels with extractor fans running continuously, which some growers are now doing.

CUTTING FOR SHOWS

Firstly fill the deep containers with fresh clean water and place them in a garage or a cold room which can be blacked out. The containers have to be spotlessly clean so that there is no bacteria that can contaminate the water. A handy container full of water is taken to the plants where the bloom is to be cut, the knife is then inserted into the stem at 45 degrees. The lower leaves are then removed leaving just one pair under the bloom on the stem. The bloom having already been split-caned is placed immediately into the water, the knife is then inserted into the water and into the stem of the dahlia and with a slight twist the air is then released from the stem. It is then taken and placed into the deep containers situated in the cool garage or cold room. The bloom is transferred into the deep water and once more the knife is inserted into the stem under water to release any air present. This procedure virtually ensures that the bloom will take up water and keep the sap rising. The best time to cut dahlias is early morning as the sap is rising at this time, and blooms kept cool until transportation. Avoid if possible cutting in the middle of the day or in bright sunlight.

TRANSPORTING BLOOMS TO THE SHOWS

Fig.17. shows my method of transporting the giant blooms to the show, which was using milk crates and Fairy Liquid bottles with a framework to hold the blooms in place with the use of Twist-its. A carpet was always placed on the floor of the van to stop the movement of crates during transportation. Two house-bricks were also placed in the milk crates to help stability. Other people used large deep containers and tied-in the blooms round the perimeter which is also a common method..