

Dahlia star

Philippa Stewart capitalised on the huge revival of interest in these showy flowers by setting up a business to sell her homegrown fresh and dried blooms, she tells Ciar Byrne



From opposite page: displays of dahlias grown by Philippa Stewart

During the winter months the ceilings of Philippa Stewart's home in the Cheshire countryside resemble a giant art installation, with hundreds of drying dahlias suspended from chicken wire hung between the beams. Her husband Nigel doesn't mind, as long as he can still see the television. In fact, he says the house feels rather empty when she sells out of the dried flowers by April.

Stewart runs justdahlias, a business she started in 2016 to sell freshly cut dahlias grown in the field next to her home. She began experimenting with dried flowers two years later, tapping into their resurgence in popularity. Then covid struck, and because there were very few weddings that year she ended up drying most of her harvest and selling it by post. Now she combines growing fresh flowers for florists with selling dried ones during the winter months.

Stewart believes dried dahlias have a different appeal to the fresh flowers. 'Drying brings out a whole shape and colour and texture that's just not there when they are fresh. Don't get me wrong, I love them fresh, but the dried ones are beautiful. Dried flowers have come back massively into fashion. There are plenty of dried grasses and smaller flowers, but dahlias are focal flowers in dried-flower arrangements.'

With both dried and fresh dahlias it is important to cut the flowers when they are in full bloom, as they won't open after cutting. Stewart then hangs

them upside down in a well-ventilated location out of full sunlight. When it comes to packing them up to send off they are quite robust, although she uses tissue paper for some of the more fragile blooms – for some reason burgundy dahlias are more delicate than others. Her customers include the designer Layla Robinson, based in Hay-on-Wye, and the wedding flower specialists Rosehip & Wren and To a Mountain Daisy.

Stewart and her husband have lived in their home near the village of Goostrey for over 35 years. When she arrived in her 20s the house and garden needed complete renovation, and in the process she fell in love with gardening. When she gave up her career as an electronic engineer to look after their two children, she found she had time on her hands while they were at school to start growing vegetables.



Philippa finds an unusual use for her flowers

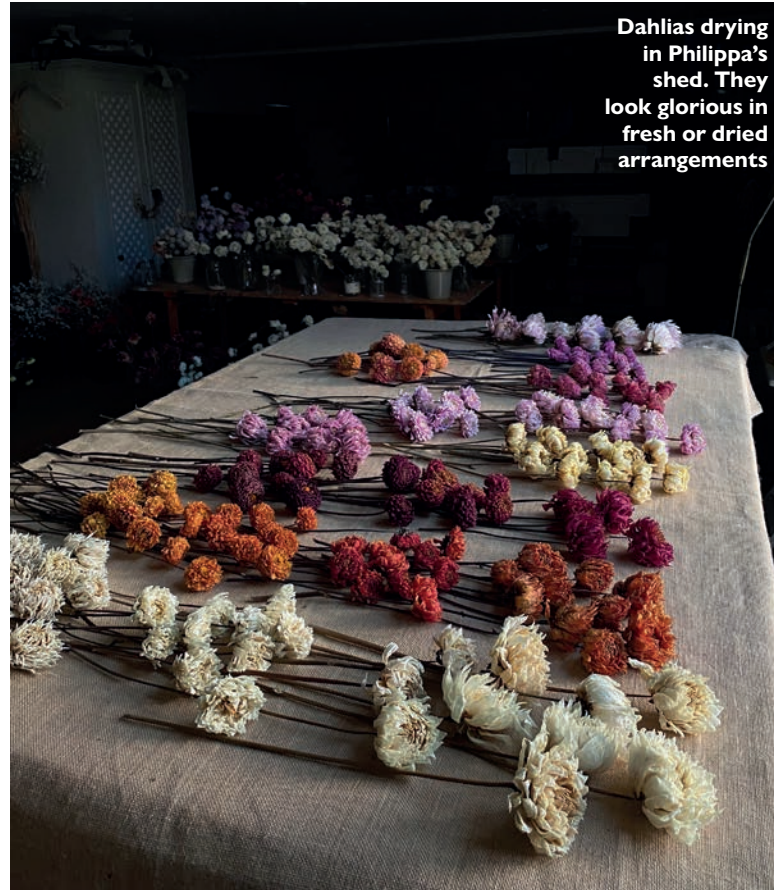
Tired of gluts of carrots and courgettes, one year she decided to try her hand at growing dahlias. At that time you could buy rooted cuttings direct from the National Dahlia Collection, so she ordered about 70 different plants. At the same time she set up a public Instagram account called @justdahlias as a way of connecting with fellow enthusiasts.

'By the end of that summer I was drowning in flowers, and I was giving them away to family, friends and anyone who would have them,' says Stewart. 'Then I wondered whether people would buy them. I loaded up the car with buckets of flowers and drove round to all the local florists. Most of them said "we don't get much call for dahlias", but when I opened the boot of the car one of them literally gasped. I thought I might be on to something.'

She asked her cattle-farmer neighbour to rotavate their field, but as it was compacted from years of not being used he ploughed it instead, leaving her with more space than she had bargained for.

'He ended up ploughing an area much bigger than I had anticipated but, like handbags, you do tend to fill the one you have no matter how big it is. I had five 2.5m beds in the field and thought I would never fill them, but of course I have.'

Stewart joined the organisation Flowers from the Farm and took its online course The Business of Growing Flowers, which helped her ➤



Dahlias drying in Philippa's shed. They look glorious in fresh or dried arrangements



to turn her hobby into a commercial enterprise, though she spent most of the first year hand-weeding couch grass out of the beds.

There is a something of a mystique around dahlia growing, as the tubers need to be lifted and stored each winter to avoid frost damage. Each grower has their own preferred method, but it is essential they are kept somewhere cool, dry and frost-free.

On her Instagram account Stewart has posted helpful videos that demonstrate her own process.

In autumn she cuts the plants down to about 12 inches before carefully digging the clumps of tubers up. She then hangs them upside down in her large shed to allow the moisture to drain out of them. Next, she trims off any dead bits of tuber and roots and cuts the stems down to two or three inches, mainly so she has something to attach a label to. These are then stored in banana boxes packed with wood shavings and placed in an outbuilding.

At the end of March she takes the tubers out. She used to pot them up and keep them in the greenhouse until the risk of frost had passed, but for the past few years she has planted them directly into the ground.

DAHLIAS DIRECT

Three of Philippa Stewart's favourite suppliers

Halls of Heddon, based in the North-East near Hadrian's Wall (hallsofheddon.com)

Gilberts Dahlias, based in Hampshire (gilbertsdahlias.co.uk)

Rose Cottage Plants, based in Essex (rosecottageplants.co.uk)

'I start planting around the beginning of May because our last frost tends to be around the end of the month. I guestimate the shoots are going to break through the ground two or three weeks after I plant them,' she explains.

She prefers this method because it saves the time it takes to pot up and harden off 450 plants, as well as the money she would have to spend on compost. Although it takes the plants a little longer to get going in the ground, once they do she says they grow 'like triflids', producing stronger and healthier plants.

She divides the large clumps of tubers, plants each smaller bunch in

a hole into which she has worked a bit of fish, blood and bonemeal and covers them to a depth of two to three inches. Then she mulches with a mix of manure and wood chips provided by her neighbour, which helps keep the moisture in and the weeds down.

She recommends that anyone new to growing dahlias chooses an open situation to plant them, as they like plenty of sunshine and minimal competition. They also grow well in pots. The trick is to choose a container that is big enough and to place it in a sheltered position where it is protected from the wind, as big plants are more vulnerable to being blown over. 'If I'm growing big varieties I'll

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grow them against the house, so I can tie the plant to something like a drainpipe,' says Stewart.

Plants shouldn't be over-watered when they are starting off, as the tubers hate sitting in soggy soil, but once they get going they are thirsty, and will need watering every day, little and often being the key.

Over the years Stewart's taste in dahlias has changed. 'I started with the dinner-plate varieties,' she says. "Café au lait" was a favourite, though I have grown many others such as "Vassio Meggos", "Otto's Thrill", "Spartacus" and "Je Maintiendrai". Then I got obsessed by the waterlily varieties such as "Carolina Wagemans", "Cameo" and "Sourire de Crozon" before moving on to the pom-poms like "Tam Tam" and

"Minley Carol". She believes the huge number of available varieties has led to the renaissance in interest.

Last year she experimented with growing them from seed. Dahlias don't come true – if you plant 20 seeds from a seedhead you will get 20 different flowers – so it's a matter of trial and error. Once she's grown a new dahlia she likes she propagates it from the tubers, which will be identical to the parent plant. 'I was told to expect a 90% failure rate with the seedlings in terms of not liking the blooms,' says Stewart. 'In fact, I would say I have ended up keeping 80% of the seedlings I grow.'

Her dream is to come up with her own named series of dahlias, but this is a long game as tubers need to be grown on for several years to make

sure they are disease-resistant and stable. 'Some of my favourites would be considered failures in dahlia circles, but there is joy in not following the rules and growing purely for the love of flowers,' she says.

Her plans include growing more from seed and writing and taking photographs for a book about growing and drying dahlias. 'It has amazed me how many avenues have opened up to me,' says Stewart. 'I have been asked to take part in the prestigious Strawberry Hill House Flower Festival for the past two years and appeared on Gardeners' World – that was such an honour as it is a programme that I have watched all my adult life. All that from me with a shovel in the field!' ■

◆ justdahlias.co.uk



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