



DAHLIA TALK

FROM TUBERS TO BLOOMS



PRICE-LESS DAHLIAS

by Martin Král

Several years ago, my friend Peter Haslhofer (he of the 200+ Hapet introductions) sent me an Email in late January and requested several dahlia varieties. When my search for these named winners proved fruitless, I visited the new Dahliaaddict.com website for my first time. What a revelation! Not only did the site offer dahlias from more than 150 vendors - the vast majority were unknown to me, since they didn't advertise in dahlia publications - but the prices! For so many well-established varieties, these ranged all over the spectrum. Moreover, most were already sold out, since I began this search in early February. Needless to say, I had to notify Peter that his small list could not be filled that spring.

What has happened to our once-sane world of dahlia prices? It seems that those of us relying on club dahlia tuber sales with stable, uniform pricing – disrupted only by an occasional tuber auction's heady bidding - had been lulled into thinking that only the extraordinarily rare or highly prized introductions deserved superior valuation. After all, Econ 101 teaches that prices are determined by the interaction of supply vs. demand in the market. Thus, relative scarcity affects pricing, it confidently asserts.

Not so in the dahlia world. As the Dahliaaddict website reveals, some highly regarded introductions do feature top prices, but for the majority of the dahlias the price differentiation from vendor to vendor has little bearing on either market factor. Instead, some dahlia sellers have chosen their own criteria to establish pricing for varieties they offer. Motivated by avarice? Their own unfamiliarity with what's on the market? A bottom-line calculation of operating expenses? In some cases these varieties are well-known in our dahlia world; others are ones that already appear in lower-cost mass market tuber packets. These resellers price all dahlias the same, as do most clubs offering dahlias at club tuber sales.

So why would any sane person pay insane prices for perfectly pedestrian dahlias? Let the owner of a large dahlia nursery put it in perspective: "The exhibition quality dahlias with appeal to experienced dahlia growers are just a small segment of the dahlia marketplace. Of the many dahlias we have introduced, most go to the general gardening public. Price sensitivity does not appear to be as an important factor there; those buyers have other intentions for their purchases and are willing to pay."

When setting a price for a product, normally the cost of production, its quality, and a bonus incentive (profit) play a role in price differentiation. Yes, production cost may be quite modest, since asexual reproduction through tuber division or cuttings is the only sure way to vegetatively reproduce a known variety. But other concerns become salient when referring to a volatile, easily spoiled commodity like the dahlia: a short list includes proper storage, tuber production, disease resistance, viability of the stock, and careful handling long before the plant emerges from the ground.

Let's add to this the hybrid dahlia's genetic makeup. It is an octoploid, so unlike the human race with its x and y chromosomes, a *Dahlia x variabilis* may sport 16, 32, or even 64 of these! Such extraordinary genetics have offered this huge diversity of bloom and foliage form, as well as a kaleidoscope of colors we treasure in dahlias. Yet that rich complexity has its shadow side: genetic stability is not guaranteed. Perfectly formed double flowers may become singles, sports or mutants, have wolf petals, are more susceptible to virus, and other anomalies — permanently. The phenotype also may exhibit variation in growth and bloom on the basis of climate, location, and sun exposure.

So, at best, the hybrid dahlia is a product to be enjoyed for some seasons. When hybrid vigor becomes challenged by its own genes along with environmental conditions, then the stock must be replaced. Many cherished varieties have fallen out of public favor that way. Buyers and vendors must be made aware of that eventuality, so dahlias need to be priced accordingly. However, the profit motive is paramount among many of these new vendors, much to the chagrin of experienced dahlia raisers who see their introductions get wide distribution within a couple years of their release in the marketplace. The originators themselves seldom benefit financially beyond those early seasons. As one local grower ruefully observed while looking at a rack of Dutch-grown dahlias: "Here my Kelsey Annie Joy is now sold across the globe. Had I been able to control its distribution, it would have paid for my daughter's college education."



**Dahlia Talk Co-Authors
Martin Kral and Dianne Reitan
at the Rocky Reach Dam in Wenatchee, WA**



