



Gemini and Me in The Backyard

By Dianne Reitan

Happy New Year, my fellow dahlia enthusiast! I hope your holidays were as wonderful as mine were - full of loud laughter, scrumptious food and so many baking championships and movie marathons - sometimes I forgot what day it was! I even got the best Christmas present of my life. *Classy Closets* came and took one of our five bedrooms and converted it into a walk-in dressing and storage space - my own personal boudoir. It was a fun way to end a hard year. Fourth quarter can be exhausting for dahlia growers and with the festivities behind us as well, we can now recalibrate ourselves and look ahead with anticipation and contemplate the possibilities of what the new growing season could look like for us.

We will peruse the seed and tuber catalogs, printed or online, and consider if we go for more of the tried and true dahlia varieties and / or wrap our heads around the myriad of new introductions and decide if our budgets can handle the splurge. I couldn't help but notice that even the oldest and largest dahlia farm in the US has jumped on the trendy bandwagon and has an exclusive blush-pink offering that is sure to delight all generations for years to come.



Dianne holding her husband's favorite dahlia, Bohemian Spartacus.

2026 means big changes for me personally and for my dahlia vocation. Drum roll please..... I'm joining my husband in retirement! Well, sort of. David retired two years ago and has patiently put our travel plans on hold as he helped me with my commercial dahlia farm. You know a man loves you when being together almost twenty years, he tirelessly helps you with your flower dreams. But this year he turns 70 and I'll be 54 and after a year of dealing with his shingles, gout and needing to change the diet due to a not-so-good heart report, it was clear that we cannot treat this precious existence as a dress rehearsal. After tending to over 1,700 dahlia plants last summer, it was obvious we needed a different lifestyle going forward.

So, rather than take an hour to drive to and from my leased land at the mining museum like I have been for the last three years, I'll be planting about 100 dahlias in my very own backyard. While it's always fun to hear the 'oohs' and 'aahs' when folks walked into my 20' x 100' high tunnels with hundreds of dahlias, I'm actually loving the idea that now my dahlia bloom and tuber customers as well as my students from my growing workshops can come experience a more intimate and personal garden experience with me. Another cool outcome from scaling back my business - Jillian, my cousin / employee, became as enthralled with the dahlia like I did, and is processing over 1,000 crowns for me as she launches her own dahlia venture.



Dianne's backyard for the last 15 years.

Our home is about 700 feet lower in elevation than where my dahlias were planted previously but all of Colorado Springs is known for being one of the top three cities in America for the most hail. The roof on our home has been replaced three times in five years! Our 'high hail frequency' means that my dahlias must be protected and we will be designing the space using the same 50% shade cloth from Bootstrap Farmer that we used in our commercial farm. The thicker-weave cloth does a great job of double duty - keeping the dahlias from burning up in a high and dry climate and safeguarding the dahlias from being shred to pieces.

It's going to take some creative thinking to figure out how to use this cloth over my dahlias while keeping aesthetic features in mind. Over the last few years, the hail has knocked out so many branches in our yard that what was a shade-loving space for hostas, begonias, impatiens, etc, has now become a redesign project not just for the dahlias but for other sun-loving perennials and annuals I will now need to consider. We also have two very spoiled miniature schnauzers who think the yard is theirs so compromises will need to be made.



Gemini's conceptual drawing of Dianne's new backyard.

This is where Gemini comes in. Since I use Google Workspace for the business, I had access to a more private AI application rather than free ChatGPT. While I am a subscriber to Garden Gate and will go through those magazines for inspiration and ideas, I wanted to see how artificial intelligence would redesign my backyard. **Here is the prompt I gave:** Help me redesign an existing square, all grass backyard that is 35' x 61' feet with 100 dahlia plants and other sun-loving perennials. Shade cloth needs to cover the dahlias but I want it to look nice, not sloppy and while the dahlias need to be planted in a linear fashion for staking, I do want some curves and shape in the space.

Gemini's response: Redesigning a 35x61 foot space to accommodate 100 dahlias while avoiding the look of a commercial farm is a fun challenge. Since dahlias require heavy staking and linear rows for airflow, the key is to use **structural landscaping** to "frame" the utility. Here is a design concept that balances the geometry of the dahlias with the soft curves of a perennial garden.

1. The Layout Concept: "The Garden Gallery"

Instead of one massive block of dahlias in the center, we will treat the dahlias like a "gallery" in the middle, surrounded by a "frame" of curved perennial beds.

The Zones

- The Perimeter (The Frame): Create 5–8 foot deep planting beds along the fence lines. Use deep, sweeping curves rather than straight edges. This is where your sun-loving perennials (Salvia, Echinacea, Phlox, Rudbeckia) will live.
- The Central Core (The Dahlia Allee): A rectangular area in the center (approx. 18x45 feet) dedicated to the dahlias. By keeping them in the center, the surrounding perennials hide the "legs" of the dahlia plants and the irrigation lines.

2. Managing 100 Dahlias

To plant 100 dahlias comfortably, you need about 350 square feet of dedicated bed space.

- Linear Rows: Plant in four double-rows. Each row is 20 feet long.
- Spacing: 18 inches between plants; 3 feet between double-rows for walking paths.
- The Paths: Use high-quality cedar mulch or crushed gravel for the paths between dahlia rows. This keeps the linear section looking intentional and clean.

3. High-End Shade Cloth Integration

The biggest aesthetic "risk" is the shade cloth. To keep it from looking sloppy, avoid PVC pipes or loose bungee cords.

- Permanent Timber Framework: Build a "pergola-lite" structure using 4x4 pressure-treated posts or cedar. Install them at the corners of your dahlia beds.
- Cable System: Run stainless steel aircraft cables between the posts.
- Retractable Panels: Instead of one giant tarp, use custom-sized shade panels with grommets that slide along the cables.
- Color Choice: Avoid green or black agricultural plastic. Use tan, sand, or "wheat" colored high-density polyethylene (HDPE) knitted cloth. It looks like architectural fabric and feels much more "designer."

4. Design Elements for Visual Interest

Use steel edging or cobbles to create a crisp line between the grass/paths and the perennial beds. Plant tall, airy perennials like *Verbena bonariensis* or ornamental grasses (like *Miscanthus*) near the shade structure posts to break up the hard lines. At the end of the central dahlia path, place a large birdbath, an arbor, or a colorful glazed pot to draw the eye through the "rows."

5. Sample Plant Palette (Sun-Loving)

To complement the bold textures of dahlias:

- Texture: *Stipa tenuissima* (Mexican Feather Grass) for movement.
- Color Echoes: *Agastache* 'Blue Fortune' (to provide blue tones that dahlias lack).
- Late Season: *Sedum* 'Autumn Joy' to bridge the gap as dahlias reach their peak.

Not bad for one prompt! If you have any thoughts on this, send me a response here. Between now and the March Dahlia Talk, I'll dive into this redesign and share the final decisions and conceptual drawings with you this spring. Stay tuned.



