



Mr Dunbar's Dahlia

John Dunbar with 'Bonnie Blue'

Jeremy Miles meets the Christchurch gardener who is hoping to create a new hybrid dahlia from a beautiful family heirloom

For an amateur gardener with a simple love of dahlias John Dunbar has come a long way. Until recently this genial 70-year-old was content to grow his favourite blooms to provide an annual floral flourish to the garden of his riverside home at Iford near Christchurch. It really didn't go much further than that.

Now, however, he is planning to practice intricate cross-pollination in an attempt to create his own hybrids. Quite a remarkable feat considering that a year ago he didn't even know what his prized dahlias were called! A national gardening magazine contacted John after they heard that he had been growing plants from dahlia tubers that had been in his family since the 1940s. These gnarled old friends, kept through the winter in a storage space beneath his house, are retrieved every spring and for decades have been replanted and lovingly tended resulting in a profusion of striking purple flowers.

Like his father before him, John simply referred to his prized plants as 'purple pompoms'. The gardening experts soon

put him right, identifying his vintage dahlias as a rare example of the 'Bonnie Blue', a variety that originally came from Holland and enjoyed a brief period of popularity back in 1930s and 40s.

Working in his small but beautifully tended garden, just a stone's throw from the banks of the River Stour, John

explained the intriguing history behind this family heirloom. Growing up in Pembrokeshire during the austere years after the Second World War, the purple pompoms were a familiar sight in the family garden and much prized by his father. John remembers them as a welcome splash of colour; a simple pleasure during a financially tough but happy childhood in west Wales.

His parents - Arthur and Winifred - had more pressing concerns than to spend time worrying about flowers. John was the 12th of 15 children - nine boys and six girls. There were a lot of mouths to feed on Arthur meager wages from his job at the local milk factory. "I can't remember helping Dad in the garden much but I do remember him growing veg and stuff," says John. "Dad loved his runner beans, and the dahlias were certainly there too. Their shape is absolutely beautiful."

In the 1960s his father gave some of the tubers to one of John's brothers, Alan. When some years later Alan, who was serving with the Army, was posted to Cyprus he asked John if he'd like the old



'Bonnie Blue'

family plants. "I hadn't thought about them that much but once I started growing them, well that was it, all the memories came flooding back," he smiles.

John loves working in his garden and, following a heart attack three years ago, finds it fits in perfectly with a healthy living regime that also includes walking, bird watching, ballroom dancing and kayaking. "I actually do the gardening just for my own pleasure," says John, who although he claims not to be an expert, has clearly picked up some good cultivation advice along the way. But now he's upped his gardening game. Through his brush with the gardening professionals John discovered that national dahlia expert Ken Stock, someone he had long admired, lived in a leafy Bournemouth suburb just half-a-mile from his house.

A meeting with Stock, a five time winner of the Royal Horticultural Society's Garden Merit Award, was

arranged. A visit to Ken's garden which contains more than 600 varieties of dahlia, many of which are hybrids bred by him inspired John to take his cultivation practices a significant step further. "After seeing what Ken can achieve from two different flowers by hand-pollination, I decided to give it a go."

John admits that his initial attempt to create his own 'Dunbar hybrid' has been less than successful but he puts this down to a combination of inexperience and bad weather. Undaunted he has given it another try. Hopefully it won't be too long before John creates a worthy successor to his beloved purple pompoms. □



The family heirloom tubers

Ken Stock's small but nonetheless spectacular garden at Little Wisley in Petersfield Road, Bournemouth, is open to visitors during the summer months and raises money for a variety of charities. Call 01202 425182 or visit his website kesdahlias.co.uk for more details.

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Ken Stock in his Bournemouth garden

Top Tips For Growing Glorious Dahlias

Dahlias grow in most kinds of soil but producing really good ones is an absolute art. You need a site that gets plenty of sunshine, has good drainage and is protected from the wind.

Planting: For best results plant your tubers when there is no more danger of frost. Plant them around six inches below the surface in ordinary garden soil making sure they are well bedded-in with some compost. If you use a commercial fertilizer keep the nitrogen content down. John recommends the high potash feed Miracle-Gro. He puts a handful of chicken pellets into the compost, covers the tubers with a little mound of earth about four inches high and waters his plants once a week, a little less after September. Do not overwater while the dahlias are establishing a root system.

Over-wintering: After the first frosts have blackened the foliage, cut back to the ground. In mild regions and on well-drained soils, leave the tubers in the ground and cover with a 3-6inch deep layer of bark chips or garden compost to protect them from frost. In colder areas or on heavy soils, lift and store the tubers by placing them in shallow wooden boxes packed with a peat-free compost or dry sand. Cover the tubers leaving the crown exposed. Store in a dry, cool, frost-free place, if storing in a garden shed cover with newspaper if a hard frost is predicted.

For more advice on growing dahlias visit the National Dahlia Society website dahlia-nds.co.uk