

GARDENING WITH THE

EXPERTS

This week...

- Dahlias
- Exotics

The world's finest share their tips for success



Robert with the giant decorative 'Aggie White'



Robert grows over 300 plants for the shows in his garden at home



The National Dahlia Society exhibits at a number of shows and provides a wealth of information to growers



Visiting as many shows as you can is a good way to see what varieties are doing well



Robert won the American Medal in the novice class at the National Show last year



The variety it all started with: 'Spartacus'

What advice would you give to others wanting to grow and show dahlias?

I joined the National Dahlia Society and by looking through its bulletins I began to get an idea of what varieties were the most popular at the larger shows. I still do this every year and would always encourage new growers to follow suit. Some varieties are okay for getting started at the local shows but when you see varieties winning year in, year out at the National, there's a reason for it.

My growing improved massively once I started watching the Dave Gillam video diaries on YouTube! I was able to directly compare my plants to those on the screen as well as learn some of the finer details about how to grow certain varieties, such as the number of flowers on a plant, feeding regimes and how much disbudding each variety needs.

But my biggest piece of advice to anyone looking to get started is to have a look at your local shows and grow a maximum of one or two varieties for each class. Get some good stock from a local grower or a reputable nursery. Lastly, ask advice. Top growers aren't winning shows by withholding information from their competitors. They are at the top due to their dedication to their hobby and, from my experience, they all have time to pass on growing tips to people getting started in the hobby - you may even make a few friends along the way!

Bitten by the bug!

Dave Gillam meets a young man taking the dahlia world by storm

Some 10 years ago I was first in touch with Robert Read, then a 14-year-old boy from Lambourn, West Berkshire. Over the years I've seen his name pop up in various places but in the last two or three seasons Robert - now 24 - has really got the bug and is making some waves on the show scene.

When did you start growing dahlias?

My life with dahlias started as long ago as I can remember. My dad was a keen showman, winning at the local and regional shows with dahlias and various other flowers and vegetables, and I would help out by taking cuttings, potting on plants, watering and disbudding. Eventually my dad's interest dwindled due to lack of time and the dahlias were left in the ground for several years. When I was about 12 or 13 I decided I wanted to try growing them for myself. I dug up



Dave Gillam

A grower for 25 years, in 2012 Dave won National Individual Champion awards at each of the English (Shepton Mallet), Welsh and Scottish National Dahlia Society competitions, the first time this has ever been accomplished. He's very busy on YouTube, where you'll find dozens of videos on how to grow dahlias.

the large tubers and set them up in the heated greenhouse. Due to the time in the ground many didn't start up and the majority of the labels had faded, but I still managed to take quite a few cuttings. I planted out all the plants and when they flowered in August I was amazed to see that I had about 40 plants of the large decorative variety 'Spartacus'. I entered them in the decorative class in a local show. From

then on I was completely hooked. I promptly ordered some tubers for the following year and my collection began to grow, but 'Spartacus' remains a favourite to this day.

I grow in a small plot of land close to my house in Lambourn, West Berkshire. This year I intend to grow around 300 plants for the national and regional shows, along with an additional 50 or so plants for the local shows in early August.

What are your biggest achievements to date?

My biggest win came in 2018 when I won the American Medal in the novice class at the National Show, which called for two vases of three dahlias, where I entered 'Winholme Diane' and 'Oakwood Goldcrest'.