



The Dahlia Gardens

The Dahlia Gardens in Wilcox Park are a living legacy in bloom. Each fall, Wilcox Park in Westerly, Rhode Island becomes a living canvas of color, thanks to the dazzling display of dahlias that brighten the landscape and lift the spirits of visitors. These showstopping blooms are not only a seasonal highlight, but they are also a connection to Westerly's horticultural past and a testament to the passion of local volunteers.

The park's Dahlia Gardens began in 2019 with a gift of 19 tubers from Gayle Wentworth, who cultivates the dahlias at Enders Island, marking Westerly's 350th anniversary. This generous donation rekindled a tradition that dates back over a century to George L. Stillman, a Westerly native who co-founded the American Dahlia Society in 1914. Stillman hybridized over 300 varieties and sold them through beautifully illustrated catalogues. His home at 25 Granite Street, along with gardens at Newton Avenue, Beach Street, and the family farm, became hubs of dahlia innovation. Today, copies of several of his original catalogues are available to view in the Westerly Library's historical collection.

Fast forward to the present: Joan Sienkiewicz, a 2018 URI Master Gardener, now oversees four distinct dahlia beds in the park, including those at the Columbus Statue and the historic Women's Urn. With help from Master Gardener and community volunteers, nearly 150 tubers are planted, staked, deadheaded, and lovingly tended each season.

Dahlias aren't a low maintenance flower! After blooming from midsummer through the first fall frost, the real work begins. Tubers must be carefully dug up, labeled, cleaned, and stored through the winter in just-right conditions—not too cold or too dry. Several Master Gardeners store them in wood shavings in their basements (but never on concrete, which leaches moisture). Humidity and temperature are measured and the tubers checked periodically. Despite meticulous care, some tubers are lost each year to rot or drying out. Replanting is an annual labor of love and dedication.

Dahlias thrive in full sun and rich, well-drained soil and need consistent watering and support as they grow. Their complex genetics - recognized in 32 classes and countless forms like ball, cactus, and waterlily - mean that each plant is unique. The Wilcox Park dahlia flower beds are both curated and spontaneous; while Joan may design with a theme (like the 2024 Barbie-pink display), Mother Nature often adds her own surprises. There's a reason why so many people fall in love with dahlias! They bloom when most other flowers fade, filling late summer and early fall with color, life, and joy. Bees and butterflies are especially fond of the single-petal varieties, making the garden not only beautiful but ecologically vibrant.

Visitors to the park are drawn to the dahlias again and again, many stopping to ask questions, take photos, or simply enjoy the spectacle. Bouquets from the beds even grace the desks inside the Westerly Library during peak bloom. And with every bloom, there's a quiet nod to George Stillman and the generations of gardeners he inspired.

Whether you're strolling through Wilcox Park in September or paging through one of Stillman's historic catalogues upstairs in the library, you're participating in a rich legacy of color, community, and cultivation. The dahlias of Westerly are more than flowers; they are history in bloom.

By Joan Sienkiewicz and Kathy White,
Master Gardeners

