**Stratford sub Castle Garden Club February 2022**

**Two Missing Speakers……………….. No Problem!**

Dahlias, now a very popular plant, should have been the topic but the speaker couldn’t come. His replacement, whose subject was ‘Topical Tips’ didn’t come either, at a few minutes notice. We were sitting there ready to start the meeting. Was this a disaster? No, we did the quiz, composed by Steve Mayall, ages ago, ready for such an event. We were very glad of it so ‘Thank You Steve.’ It was enjoyed by everyone, especially a new member who got the chance to chat to people and those that went home with a prize.

What we originally wanted to know was **‘what is the best way to care for Dahlias, during our winter, since they originate in Mexico?’** Well, I have an up to date answer as in Mid-October last, I visited Anglesey Abbey, a National Trust Property near Cambridge, famous for its dahlias. When we arrived there was a notice on reception stating that all the dahlias had been removed. Why, I wondered, as there had been no frost that would kill them. Walking through the Winter Garden (which was well tended and very good) we found two of the gardeners. They explained that their vast collection of dahlias had become infected by a virus. It didn’t kill them but they didn’t grow well. The planting scheme, aimed at giving a good design, was spoiled as most of them did not reach the expected height, they didn’t flower well and the foliage was not healthy. All of them were thrown out. How interesting, where did the virus come from? Was the virus in the soil? Was it in some of the plants when they were purchased and did it spread between plants? Gardening poses lots of questions.

‘What do you do when they are healthy, to get them through the winter successfully’ I asked? I was amazed by the answer but it is so sensible that I did the same with my dahlias a couple of weeks later.

As usual, when frost has blackened the foliage, cut it down to about 5 – 10 cm above ground. Carefully loosen the ground around the plant, using a fork, and then gently lift the tuber, trying not to damage it. Shake off the excess soil and then pot up the tuber in a plastic pot with compost, in the usual way. Plastic pots are good as they reduce drying out and it prevents the tubers shrivelling and dying over winter. The pots can be sparingly watered (misted) if they are becoming too dry and then, in March, proper watering can begin to start the tubers into growth. The pots need to be in a frost free place just as the tubers would need to be if they were packed away in boxes. How sensible to treat the dahlias as tender perennials and pot them up and cut out the trouble of packing them in boxes. I have mine in a frost free greenhouse, but no light is necessary for the winter months so a frost free shed or garage would be fine.

With my less important and smaller dahlia tubers I have closely packed them, right way up, into an old plastic window box and topped it up with compost. I think that these smaller tubers have a better chance of not totally drying out as I can keep up the humidity with a little water when needed.

Here is another topical tip! It won’t have escaped your notice that, apart from the last few nights, this has been a mild winter so far. If you have grasses growing in your borders, take a look. With some of mine there was new growth at the bottom so I have cut down the old, now golden growth, at least a month earlier than last year.

About once a year our lecture is on garden history and the topic this time is ‘Victorian Gardening – Ingenuity and Hard Work’ The Victorian Era was marked by good engineers and there were good gardeners too. The speaker is Christine Stones. Do come along to the Reading room, SP1 3LL, on Thursday, 24th February, 7.15 for 7.30pm. New, inexperienced gardeners, expert gardeners, folk new to the village, regular members……….. there is a warm welcome for all.

Dorothy Richards