

episode 6 show notes and advice

Episode Description

A key player in a colour-packed garden, and a true love of Sarah's and Arthur's, is the beautiful dahlia. With the low level of maintenance of a perennial and the growth of cut-and-come-again flowers, it's no wonder there's barely a patch at Perch Hill that isn't decorated with a 'stained glass carpet' of dahlias.

For your kitchen table this week, 'grow, cook, eat, arrange' focuses on rhubarb; a vegetable Arthur would consider right at home in a Beatrix Potter novel. Sarah shares her tasty syllabub recipe, with some advice on growing rhubarb in a forcer for maximum sweetness.

In this episode, discover...

- Using forcers to grow sweeter rhubarb for cooking
- Sarah's delicious syllabub recipe
- Harvesting rhubarb by candlelight
- Rhubarb's cultural importance on the west coast of Scotland
- The origins of Sarah and Arthur's love affair with dahlias
- Bringing dahlias to flourishing growth
- Sarah and Arthur's 'Desert Island dahlias'

Links and references

Pre-order Sarah's new book: <http://bit.ly/3cR0kyh>

Pre-order Arthur's new book: <http://bit.ly/3qiBgUs>

Shop on the Sarah Raven website: <http://bit.ly/3jvbaeu>

Get in touch: info@sarahraven.com

Products mentioned:

Hollywood Gladioli Collection: <https://bit.ly/2OrCAXm>

Rhubarb Collection: <http://bit.ly/3uXP8k>

Rhubarb 'Victoria': <http://bit.ly/3bl1VuW>

Classic Hyacinth Collection: <http://bit.ly/2MQbVD7>

Narcissus 'Avalanche': <http://bit.ly/3qmtEzH>

Iris x hollandica 'Red Ember': <http://bit.ly/3c78hgV>

Cosmos atrosanguineus (Chocolate cosmos): <http://bit.ly/3uUz1cS>

Calendula officinalis 'Indian Prince': <http://bit.ly/3sTuAgu>

Dahlia 'Bishop of Auckland': <https://bit.ly/2ZJTnHC>

Dahlia 'Blue Bayou': <http://bit.ly/2PxpliJ>

Dahlia 'Totally Tangerine': <http://bit.ly/30gXTh2>

Dahlia 'Ripples': <http://bit.ly/3uVgKMx>

Dahlia 'Café au Lait': <http://bit.ly/3qhzlJH>

Dahlia 'Molly Raven': <http://bit.ly/3bjH0IN>

Dahlia 'Schipper's Bronze': <http://bit.ly/3c66iqp>

Follow Sarah: <https://bit.ly/3jDTvBp>

Follow Arthur: <https://bit.ly/3jxSKK5>

episode 6 advice sheet | dahlias and rhubarb

Rhubarb

The key thing with rhubarb, besides its versatility in recipes, is that it provides something delicious to eat in spring, at a time when there is little else in the veg garden.

Our favourite varieties which we grow at Perch Hill

- Early (from March) = Timperley Early
- Mid-season (from April) = Stockbridge Arrow
- Late (from May) = Victoria

Growing

- It's fine in dappled shade
- Incredibly persistent and easy plant which can survive for centuries in a garden.
- You can force it under a terracotta forcer, or even an upturned dustbin. Pile some heat-giving manure around the crown. The exclusion of light gives a sweeter, more tender stem.
- Rhubarb are super hungry and thirsty.
- Mulch with plenty of manure every autumn.
- Easy to propagate from outer sections of a clump after a couple of years. Lift, divide and replant with lots of organic matter added to the new planting position.

To Harvest

- Wait for at least a year after planting before you start to harvest, to give them time to develop a good root system.

- Always pull, not cut, and then it's cut-and-come-again. Just give it a firm tug near the base of the plant.

Rhubarb syllabub recipe

One of my favourite spring puddings. It's quick and easy to make, as well as being light, frothy and delicious.

Serves 6-8:

- Juice and grated zest of 1 orange
- 100g caster sugar
- 6 stems of young pink rhubarb (about 500g)
- 2 cardamom pods
- 2 star anise

For the syllabub:

- 284ml double cream
- Grated zest and juice of 1 large lemon
- 3-4 tablespoons Grand Marnier, dry sherry or white wine
- 100g caster sugar

Preheat the oven to 190°C/gas mark 5.

Warm the orange juice in a pan and dissolve the sugar in it.

Cut the rhubarb into sections the length of your thumb and cook in the orange juice with the zest, cardamom and star anise for 8-10 minutes. Then cool the fruit. To make it super-easy to eat with a teaspoon, you may want to blitz it for an instant to get a smooth puree.

To make a syrupy juice, lift out the rhubarb pieces and boil up the juice until it thickens.

To make the syllabub, put the cream, lemon zest and juice, alcohol and sugar into a bowl and beat for several minutes, until the mixture becomes thick and light.

Remove the cardamom pods and star anise from the rhubarb.

Put the rhubarb into individual glasses, spoon the syllabub mixture over the top and chill for a couple of hours.

Dahlias

There are too many things for us to say about dahlias, but here is my recipe for the dahlia lasagne and practical advice for how we bring the tubers into growth now, in March/April.

Arthur's Favourites

All good for butterflies and bees

- 'Bishop of Auckland' – single crimson with dark foliage
- 'Blue Bayou' purple-lilac
- 'Totally Tangerine', terracotta colour, brilliant for pots as not too big

Sarah's Favourites

- 'Totally Tangerine' (as above)
- 'Rip City' – huge, curvy, dark crimson, fully-double (and 'Ripples' its purple brother)
- 'Café-au-lait' – very fashionable and incredible ivory colour
- 'Lou Farman', 'Sarah Raven', 'Molly Raven' and 'Schipper's Bronze' – all bred by us and incredibly beautiful and unusual.

Bringing Dahlias into growth now, in March or April

Just like potatoes, dahlias are tubers which originate from warmer climes. To get them cropping faster, with our cooler temperatures, it's worth forcing them into growth a little early by planting them into pots indoors, in late March or early April if you can.

Planting Dahlia Tubers inside

Plant into a 3 litre pot. A 2 litre size is often too small for bigger tubers and you don't want to squeeze them in and damage the root. A big pot also allows the tubers to grow happily until the frosts are finished, at which point they can be planted in the garden.

Plant each tuber in peat-free, multi-purpose potting compost, just under the compost surface, not buried deeply.

Plant them growing point or remains of last year's stems pointing up and the tubers (which remind me of a bunch of sausages) hanging below.

Water well.

Place on a heated propagator, sunny windowsill or frost-free greenhouse, until they start to shoot (which may not be until the end of April).

Water very sparsely every few days, only when the compost is completely dry.

Once you see shoots appearing from the top and roots visible in the holes at the bottom of the pot, plant out into the garden, but only if the chance of frost has passed (end of May in most of Britain).

Border Bulb Layering – including highly-scented narcissus (for picking), as the deepest layer, with dahlias on the top and Dutch iris, alliums, hyacinths and gladioli in the middle.

The below story (taken from *A Year Full of Flowers*) describes how we developed the border bulb layering system.

I knew which narcissus varieties I wanted to plant from our trial in the year 2000, so they went into the garden in the autumn of 2001. For a couple of years, we left it at that, the narcissi flowering from early March until May, with armfuls of scented flowers there for the picking. To use the space in summer and autumn, we overplanted with annual cut flowers (such as antirrhinums, cosmos and zinnias).

Then I visited Monet's garden at Giverny and fell for dahlias. I wanted to do a trial of the dark, rich coloured varieties such as 'Rip City', which I first saw there (see chapter on September). I bought three plants of 'Rip City' at Giverny and then sourced many others in that colour range, but as planting time approached, I had nowhere for them to go.

The penny dropped one early May evening, as I was starting to tidy up the foliage of the earliest flowering narcissus ('Avalanche'). Rather than adding annuals over the top this year, maybe I should try dahlias instead. We had layered bulbs in our pots, so why not try that in our borders too?

To make room for the new dahlias, this meant cutting down the narcissus foliage to ground level a few weeks earlier than was ideal, but I felt it was worth a try.

The experiment was a huge success. Rather than having a whole bed dedicated to scented narcissi and then a few annuals for picking and admiring in the summer, we now had a bed with flowers looking good throughout spring. There was a dip in late spring and early summer and then, with the dahlias' colour and flowers from July until November. We'd doubled the performance time.

Over the years, we've pushed it further. Five years ago, we added some later flowering narcissus, *Narcissus Poeticus* 'Recurvus' and N. 'Rose of May', with hyacinths and alliums around the edges. That's their safest position. In the middle of the bed, the hyacinths' and alliums' chunky foliage is in danger of forming a dense leafy canopy and drowning the emerging dahlias. Lined up around the edge of every bed, you avoid this.

We added Dahlia 'Gerrie Hoek', (reliably the earliest dahlia to flower here), to other parts of the garden, so that it would flower hopefully by mid-June. Scattered all through, we have also gradually added *Gladiolus grandiflora*. Their Tibetan prayer flag spires are a good contrast to the bosomy, undulating domes of dahlias - and we tend to contrast the colour of the two. The almost black *Gladiolus* 'Espresso' looks great with the contrasting coloured flowers of Dahlia 'Autumn Orange' and 'Molly Raven', the chartreuse green G. 'Evergreen' with any of the crimson-blacks dahlias, G. 'Purple Flora' with orange such as D. 'Happy Halloween', and finally the pure white and deeply classy, scented *Acidanthera* with softly-coloured dahlias like the 'Gerrie Hoek' (see September chapter for pictures of these combinations).

In November and December, all the beds are mulched deeply to protect the dahlias from frost, with 15cms (6 inches) of compost dropped over every dahlia crown (see November/December). We've found the mulch protects the gladioli too, which have now perennialised.

In 2019, we added yet another layer, between the dahlias and narcissi, of the unfashionable Dutch Iris. This flowers exactly when we want a filler, continuing with the regular cropping pattern, with daffs to pick through spring and dahlias from mid-summer, but a dearth of anything but alliums in May and June. That's just when Dutch Iris flower and with the interesting and glamorous varieties such as 'Red Embers', 'Lion King' and 'Tiger's Eye' now available, they form the perfect third layer. They are also true perennial bulbs, so won't ever need replanting.

Even if you don't want to devote a whole bed to this idea, use the layering in mixed flower borders for an equally brilliant effect. Twenty years on, I could not recommend this bulb planting system more passionately. We started off with just one 6m (20ft) x 1.2m (4ft) rectangular bed in the cutting garden, but have added more and more and now have four, with two more planned. They are jam-packed with flower, colour and scent for 9 months of the year. Who could ask for more?

Bulb Lasagne Year (see below for planting)

- Jan – Narcissus foliage starts to emerge and in early years we can pick the odd stem of Narcissus 'Avalanche'
- Feb – Narcissus 'Avalanche' (usually)
- March Narcissus 'Avalanche', N. 'Geranium' PLUS hyacinths
- April Narcissus 'Silver Chimes', 'Actea' and N. 'Geranium' PLUS hyacinths
- May Narcissus poeticus 'Recurvus' and N. 'Rose of May' PLUS Dutch iris and Allium 'Purple Sensation'
- June Dutch iris and first Dahlia 'Gerrie Hoek' and Allium cristophii
- July - All the dahlias and Allium sphaerocephalon
- August - All the dahlias, plus gladioli
- September - All the dahlias, plus gladioli
- Oct - All the dahlias
- Nov – The dahlias have mostly finished but we still have a few until we cut them back
- Dec - Cut down and mulch the beds for winter

Here is the method we use for a multi-layered bed of bulbs and tubers with narcissi, Dutch iris, hyacinths and alliums, planted in October/November.

- Dig a trench that's 30cm (12in) wide and 30cm (12in) deep. The length will depend on how many bulbs you are going to plant.
- We place 3-4cm (2in) of grit in the bottom, to help drainage on our heavy clay soil. I'd advise doing this on all but the freest-draining soil.
- Plant the narcissi into the grit, allowing twice the width of the bulb as spacing. This allows room for naturalising without a need for urgent dividing.
- Create a mix of 1 part grit to 3 parts soils and backfill to 4cm (2in) over the narcissi.
- Add a layer of Dutch iris, hyacinths and alliums at this level, around the bed edge.

- Back fill with the grit and soil mix (as above) to 4cm (2in) over the iris bulbs.
- Add the dahlias at 75cm (30in) spacings, just below the soil level either in autumn (if your garden is sheltered and southerly) or the following spring. Mark the position of the dahlias with a big label so you know where they are (if autumn planting) or where they should go (for spring planting)
- Mulch over the dahlia crowns to at least the depth of 10cm (4in) in a mound.