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## Heirloom bulbs vs. latest hybrids

By Molly Day Feb 7, 2007



Canna lilies grow to 6 or 8 feet tall and are available in several leaf and flower colors.

Phoenix special photo by Molly Day

MuskogeePhoenix.com, Muskogee, OK



Scott Kunst, founder of Old House Gardens - Heirloom Bulbs, said that his company is devoted entirely to these living antiques that he calls “unique, endangered and amazing.”

Kunst said that older bulbs — just like heirloom tomatoes and roses — not only preserve history and genetic diversity, but also tend to be more reliable performers in the garden, thriving in tough conditions and multiplying (as they have for centuries) rather than dying out. Many of them are also more graceful, like wildflowers, and have stronger fragrances. What's more, he says: "They're gorgeous!"

Every bulb in the Old House Gardens catalog includes the date of its first appearance in gardens, which range from the 1950s back to the 1200s. Kunst researches books of photographs, art and writings that reference flowers in order to establish the dates.

For spring planting, their most popular bulbs are dahlias which were brought into gardens by the Aztecs, arrived in Europe in 1789 and went on to become one of the "must have" plants in Victorian gardens.

"Dahlias are as easy to grow as tomatoes," Kunst said. "They want sun and staking them takes just a few minutes through the season. At the end of the season you can compost them."

"Dahlias are wonderful for bouquets," Kunst said. "I like to say they are as diverse as dogs — there is a huge difference in their sizes and appearance. Dahlia plants make a big impact in the garden and will give you a never ending cornucopia of blooms."

## **Tips for growing**

They can be grown in the vegetable garden, in beds or in pots but want a cool root zone. In order to keep them happy in pots, elevate the pot an inch or more off any patio surface and surround them with other plants.

This year Old House Gardens' "Bulb of the Year" is the Kaiser Wilhelm dahlia. Of the 10,000 19th century dahlias, Kaiser Wilhelm is one of only six survivors. It has a creamy yellow with rose red flower with a green button eye. Kunst calls it demure and "very antique looking."

The Claire de Lune dahlia has single petals with shorter, white petals around the amber central eye. The flower is named for Debussy's nocturne. It grows to 3- or 4-foot-tall with 3-inch flowers.

To get the most flowers on a 6-foot-tall dahlia, water and fertilize rather than sprinkle. Because they struggle in high heat, dahlias can be a challenge in Oklahoma. But, if they are watered well through the summer, they will bloom vigorously in the fall.

“Dahlias changed my feelings about fall gardening,” Kunst said. “When everything else is winding down, they just keep getting better and better, producing hundreds of flowers.”

Kidd’s Climax dahlia is one of the top 10 dahlias of the 20th century. It is easy to grow with 8- to 10-inch pink petals that fade to soft yellow at the center. Kunst said the flowers have lavender overtones and can grow as big as your head.

Kunst grew up gardening with his grandmother. In 1983, with his career as a middle school English teacher established, he bought an old house where he found relics of earlier owners’ gardens, including tiger lilies and single white peonies.

Wanting to know more about the history of his yard, he started exploring American landscape history and eventually earned a masters degree in historic preservation from eastern Michigan University. He opened Old House Gardens in 1983, helping historic house museums and homeowners research and restore their historic gardens. Then, in 1993 he launched the catalog that today is the only source for mail-order heirloom bulbs in the country.

Kunst looks for unique, endangered bulbs that are close to extinction, finds small farmers to grow them back into production and then offers the bulbs to the public.

“Save the Bulbs!” is Old House Gardens’ motto, and Kunst said home gardeners can play an important role in preserving the best plants from the past for future gardeners.

“All you have to do is grow them,” he said.

The catalog for Old House Gardens is divided by planting seasons: The first 28-pages are fall planted bulbs and the last 14 pages are spring planted flowers. Each flower is pictured and its history is described.

Daffodils are their most popular heirloom bulbs for fall-planting, and several of their best-selling daffodils are raised for them in Texas. They also offer tulips dating as far back as the 1500s, many of which return reliably year after year.

“Most modern tulips, he says, are bred for pot-production and the cut-flower industry,” Kunst said. “But, the Prince of Austria and others in the catalog were bred for home gardens. The key is to keep them dry in the summer, as in their native lands. One way to do that is to plant them near a shrub where the shrub will soak up irrigation.”

Other spring planted favorites they offer include elephant ears, tuberoses, rain lilies, cannas, the hardy St. Joseph’s amaryllis, and, of course, gladiolus.

“Gladiolus are the best cut flowers because they last so long in the house,” Kunst said. “One of the interesting selections is the Abyssinian glad from 1888. It takes a long season to bloom and may wait until August or September to flower. The stem arches forward “like it is leaping” and the unique white flower with a purple center is lightly fragrant.”

Old House Gardens offers sampler packages, too. For example, the Cannas for Beginners sampler is an assortment of highly dependable, less expensive heirloom cannas.

Old House Gardens is located in Michigan, but their growers are located around the country including Texas, Georgia and Oklahoma. Visit their online store at [www.oldhousegardens.com](http://www.oldhousegardens.com) or call (734) 995-1486 for a catalog.