

A dahlia mystery

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By Natalie Walsh Aug 30, 2009

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A semi-retired local attorney is collaborating with national experts to get to the root of a mystery growing in his own backyard.

The parties of interest go by the monikers Mulvey, Wisconsin Red and Catherine Becker.

The question is: Are they one and the same?

Those are the three names given by different gardeners for a very similar, very old red dahlia. Considered rare, the dahlia has dark stems and ruby-red flowers.

Jeffrey Chamberlain, an avid gardener in Schodack with a private law practice in Albany, was drawn into the case when he read about the red dahlia in an Old House Gardens catalog, a mail-order business that specializes in heirloom bulbs. He thought the dahlia in the catalog looked suspiciously familiar.

But, we're jumping ahead.

The flowering mystery began when Scott Kunst, the owner of Old House Gardens, offered customers the Catherine Becker dahlia last winter. Gardeners are known for sharing their bounty and Kunst obtained the red dahlia from an Illinois customer who, in turn, got it from a farm wife in Wisconsin who'd grown it for 40 years.

After the dahlia's picture and description appeared in the catalog, another customer, Victoria Dirst, e-mailed Kunst to let him know she knew a family that grew a very similar — if not identical — cold-tolerant dahlia that had been passed along between friends and neighbors in Wisconsin for more than 100 years.

Could these two dahlias be identical? Maybe.

Kunst said that some of the best heirloom flowers disappeared from catalogs and garden centers long ago, but "they're still out there,

passed along and enjoyed by backyard gardeners.”

He decided to investigate and look into the tubers past. He e-mailed Dirst, who is a Master Gardener in Sturgeon Bay, Wis., and discovered she had been tracking down the history of the dahlia she obtained from her former boss, John Hagman. He could trace it to his paternal grandmother’s family.

“Her maiden name was Genevieve Hodgins. She married Walter Hagman in Appleton around 1900. John believes these dahlias were being grown by the family around that time and were spread by his grandparents to Ashland, Wisconsin. John’s parents introduced them to friends in Duluth and Grand Marais, Minnesota. John has shared them with folks in Madison, Middleton, Cross Plains, Sturgeon Bay, and Washington Island, Wisconsin. Based on your photos, your Catherine Becker seems to be this very same dahlia. You indicate it has been grown near Wausaukee, Wisconsin, since 1940. Wausaukee is just 80 miles north of Appleton,” she wrote.

“Victoria included photos and we had to agree that our Catherine Becker looked a lot like her heirloom red dahlia,” Kunst said, adding “but tens of thousands of dahlias have been introduced over the past 200 years, and many of them look a lot alike.” Kunst decided more detective work was needed.

“Victoria was able to put us in touch with John Hagman’s wife, Brenda. She told us that their family red dahlia multiplied prodigiously and stored very easily.” The Catherine Becker dahlia has the same characteristics.

Brenda Hagman also told Kunst that her husband’s aunt and uncle had grown their dahlia for many years in Marinette, Wis., which is 30 miles from Wausaukee. Was this information a break in the case?

“Uncle Charlie [Koepp] was the town doctor and had many patients throughout the area as Marinette is the largest city in that part of the state. He was an avid gardener and apparently he was well-known for giving away plants to all of his patients.”

Is Kunst now certain that these two dahlias are the same? “Not yet, but we’ve exchanged tubers — which look like identical twins — and Brenda, Victoria, and we are all growing one of each dahlia side by side this summer to compare.”

The Kunst dahlia

But that's not the end of the story. In June, Kunst received an e-mail from Chamberlain, who wrote that had an unnamed dahlia that looks quite similar. He wrote: "It's a standout. It grows roughly 4 feet x 4 feet (or more) and dense enough to choke weeds if you let it sprawl. It's the densest dahlia I know. It is covered with blossoms from July through frost, whether you deadhead it or not. Nothing eats it, it seems impervious to diseases, and thrives in a variety of soils with little care.

"The tubers are large; many get to baking potato size. They winter-over easily here in zone 5 when pulled in the fall and stored in the basement. The plants proliferate — one plant will often yield 8-10 plantable tubers. I routinely give away as many as I can and still end up throwing out as many as I plant, which is usually 40-50. They almost always sprout," he wrote.

Chamberlain received his first tuber of this red dahlia about 10 years ago from a friend, Sue Mulvey, who lives near Binghamton. She, in turn, got it from an elderly neighbor, who reported having it for many years. "Failing any better identification we've named the dahlia Mulvey Red," he wrote. He didn't know of any Wisconsin connection.

Visit to Michigan

In an attempt to solve this puzzle, Kunst exchanged tubers with Chamberlain and added Mulvey Red to the comparison planting. Chamberlain happened to be in Michigan this summer and took a road trip to see Kunst and the other red dahlias in Ann Arbor, where Old House Gardens is located.

Kunst said Chamberlain "brought us several blooming stems of Mulvey Red dahlia ... so we could all compare them with Catherine Becker and Wisconsin Red. The consensus seemed to be that Catherine Becker and Wisconsin Red could be identical, while Mulvey Red seems to be very similar but slightly different. Though we also agreed that we need to collect more data, in other words continue to compare them over the course of the growing season and probably next year."

Chamberlain said the dahlias looked very similar to him, but a final decision has yet to be made.

"We had them side by side and were looking for differences," he said, noting that any differences in the blossoms were "very minor" and the sort of variations you would expect on dahlias. This fall, the

tubers will be dug up, compared and evaluated.

Chamberlain added that horticulturists and “dahlia geeks” will take the comparison more seriously. “I like the stories,” he said. And he likes this dahlia, which blooms profusely at a time when many other flowers are waning.

At this point, Old House Gardens is still gathering evidence. Can you compare DNA to determine if they are the same cultivar? Maybe. Kunst was advised that the science for this is still experimental, the results would be inconclusive and the process very costly. Like checking a suspect’s DNA to tie him to a crime scene, scientists can isolate specific plant traits to distinguish one plant species from another, but not one cultivar from another.

A survivor

Why go through all this? A rose is just a rose after all. Or, in this case, a red dahlia is just a red dahlia. What makes this plant so special?

Kunst said that pass-along heirloom plants — like this red dahlia — often have certain qualities in common that help preserve them. If the three are the same it means that this old dahlia has been grown and shared by gardeners from New York to Wisconsin for at least 100 years. “That suggests that it’s tougher, more adaptable, and stores more easily — and storage is probably the trickiest part of dahlia growing — and also that it has a wider appeal as more gardeners have found it worth bringing into their gardens and then passing it along to other gardeners who admire it,” he said.

“It’s sort of like a good pie crust recipe. If one family loves it so much they’ve passed it down for 40 years, well, that’s nice. But if that same recipe has been shared with other families in four different states and passed down for 100 years, that recipe is probably a really good one. And all of this has happened outside commercial channels. It’s not like the recipe was printed on the back of bags of Gold Medal flour for the last century. The only thing keeping this great old dahlia going is that ordinary backyard gardeners have recognized its excellence and put in the work it takes to keep it growing and to disseminate it,” he said.

The hardest part of dahlia growing is storing them over the winter. “They’re not like inanimate antiques that you can just stick up in the attic to be rediscovered 100 years later in good shape. If you tried that with dahlias, they’d be dead within a second year. And you

can't just leave them out in the garden like a peony or other long-lived hardy perennial. So the level of care, year after year, that dahlias require really underlines the value that gardeners have seen in this particular dahlia over the past century," he added.

One of the deep, emotional pleasures of gardening is the way it connects us, Kunst continued. "With the earth and nature, certainly, but also with other gardeners. Gardeners are always sharing seeds and cuttings, over the fence, with friends, in garden clubs, etc. And when we grow a plant that's been shared like that for almost a century, it expands our community of garden friends back through time — and I'd say that offers a deep, satisfying feeling of connectedness. Rootedness, you could call it."

If you recognize this dahlia, and think you may have something to add that would break the case, contact Scott Kunst through his Web site: www.oldhousegardens.com.