

Design



A European hand-tied bouquet stands on its own with the help of crossed stems.

Photos by Russell Yip / The Chronicle

# GIVING DAHLIAS THEIR DUE

**By Sarah Adler**  
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

When it comes to flowers, perfection can be overrated, says celebrity floral artist Michael Gaffney.

Take the dahlia, the official flower of San Francisco since 1926.

“Their heads are often neither perfect nor straight, and they don’t always come in the same size,” says Gaffney. “But working with dahlias is like working with an undiscovered fashion designer who is using a novel fabric.”

This cosmopolitan beauty, which has been somewhat forgotten during the past 20 years, has been making appearances in summer wedding bouquets, dramatic centerpieces and fall flower arrangements in autumnal colors.

Gaffney, the founder of the American Schools of Flower Design, with eight locations including one in San Francisco, urges students to embrace these globe-like flowers.

“They are like the exciting new girl on the block,” he says.

Dahlias thrive in the fog, so varieties are plentiful in the Bay Area. He teaches his students to appreciate their color, form and versatility.

Gaffney, of Milwaukee, Wisc., created arrangements for the movie “Black Swan” and recently authored his first book, “Design Star” — teaches simple, step-by-step techniques for designing creations from the classic American and Dutch mass to the European hand-tied bou-

*Celebrity floral artist urges students to embrace the official flower of San Francisco*



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quet. The classic American bouquet is the most economical because it features just one or two types of flowers and inexpensive filler all spaced apart in a grid pattern, he says. “Classic American is one to bring to the hospital, for someone who got that promotion or congratulations on pregnancy.”

Head-to-head flowers are used throughout the Dutch mass design to create a solid shape. It’s created the same way as the classic American — creating a grid pattern of upper and lower decks followed by the penthouse.

Rather than using sparse greens, here arrangers should pack in the spaces with additional flowers for density. Gaffney trained Oprah Winfrey’s staff at Harpo Productions on this technique.

Bright dahlias become the centerpiece of a European hand-tied bouquet that stands on its own, thanks to crossed stems that produce a haystack effect.

Gaffney also offers students insider tips, such as immersing flowers upside down in water for 30 minutes, followed by a spray of crowning glory, a wax sealant.

Great designers use more than one green, he says. For an everyday, affordable bouquet, Gaffney recommends going to the backyard and clipping what’s available.

*E-mail comments to Sarah Adler at [sadler@sfgchronicle.com](mailto:sadler@sfgchronicle.com).*

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