

## **Phil Traff**

### **2010 Inductee**

### **Federation of Northwest Dahlia Growers Hall of Fame**

Easily the seminal figure in Northwest dahlia culture, Phil exemplified the highest standards of commitment, volunteerism, and innovation found in those rare individuals who manage career, business, and their passionate pursuit of perfection in a chosen hobby. Never one to shrink from controversy, Phil invigorated the organizational structure of American dahlia enthusiasts by proposing rule changes, engaging in detailed analyses, and by setting forth standards that we are still striving to meet. Instrumental in founding the Puget Sound Dahlia Association in 1976, he also was a leading figure in creating the Federation of Northwest Dahlia Growers, in establishing current judging workshops and educational efforts, outreach and marketing initiatives, and in developing show guidelines that moved dahlia exhibition from a limited hobbyist event to large-scale public arenas.

C. Phillip Traff was born in 1948 into a dahlia-growing family. His mother Jennie encouraged the youngster to accompany her to dahlia shows in his home town of Aberdeen and the greater Puget Sound area. By the time he was 15, Phil was already showing blooms successfully. In 1964, Phil won Best in Show at Kitsap (prior to his junior year in high school), and he proved to be a resourceful and exacting exhibitor. While attending the University of Washington, his pursuit of a teaching certificate was matched by his dogged devotion to better dahlia culture. He traveled widely up and down the West Coast and struck up friendships with the likes of Jack Almand, Paul Comstock, and Henry White. His broad interest in all things dahlia also took him around the US to attend shows and ADS meetings. International relationships were cemented in exchanges with British, Australian, and New Zealand growers. Few growers in those days failed to acknowledge Phil's prodigious energy and zest for challenging the status quo.

After philosophical differences led him and others to separate from their home club, Phil guided the establishment of the Puget Sound Dahlia Association in 1976 as an active sponsor of dahlia culture with an emphasis on education, creativity, seedlings, and dahlia publications. His teaching career curtailed year-round dahlia efforts only slightly: Phil Traff could be counted on to call you at all hours of day or night to bounce an idea around or to 'volunteer' you for club needs. His tour de force approach never lagged. Serving as actual or de facto PSDA president for the next 15 years, he was the principal driver for better shows, more skilled judges, and, ultimately, increased club membership with an active core of committed functionaries and a lively series of culture presentations. He was responsible for (and bankrolled a considerable portion of) the 1984 National Show in Seattle. He then expanded the concept of a broad-based Seattle Flower Show that topped the dahlia show calendar for several years in the 1980s, until others carried the idea into a mid-winter event.

Marketing the dahlia was one of Phil's passions too. Toward that goal, Phil took over the task of continuing the publishing traditions of the *Pacific Dahlia* by starting a new, broader-based regional yearbook, *Dahlias of Today*. As main instigator and guiding hand, he steadfastly improved that publication's content and appearance. This slender love child of 1980 has since grown into one of the dahlia world's best-regarded works, its 100 colorful pages replete with concise articles on a wide range of topics, including international coverage and foreign contributions.

Not content with starting only a dahlia club, Phil was instrumental in the organization of the Federation of Northwest Dahlia Growers in 1984, the parent association of many prominent northwest dahlia clubs. Several of the organizational meetings for the Federation were held at Phil's home, and it was there that the first committee chairmanships were assigned one afternoon shortly after the official formation of the Federation. Once again, Phil would level his steely eyes at you and explain how you would love to be in charge of, for example, education. You didn't say "no."

From the beginning, the Federation has held yearly cultural (spring) and judging (summer) workshops. The early workshops were held just steps from Phil's home at a local Grange hall. As could be expected,

Phil contributed greatly to the agendas, suggesting seminar topics and judging subjects. He also helped formulate the Federation judging curriculum. The structured format required Federation judges to both grow and exhibit dahlias, preventing judges who did neither from judging at Federation shows.

Phil became a commercial dahlia raiser soon after moving to Sumner, where he applied his energies to raising waterlilies, laciniates, and quality exhibition dahlias; he also sold cut flowers to help pay for this out-of-control hobby. His introductions still hold the ground for show display: WILDMAN, APOLLO, STELLA J., JEAN ENERSEN, POCRATES, MARY JENNIE (his aunt) and, of course, JENNIE herself. These are just a few of the cornucopia of great dahlias that came from Phil's hands.

Late in the '80s, Phil decided to move the operation east near Black Diamond, where he found suitable land for an even larger operation. However, by that time, the tireless Phil had become weakened from contracting HIV, and to his regret had to leave much of the care of his dahlias in the hands of others. He trimmed his collection to 400 plants in 1991 and, though by now terminally ill with the AIDS virus, he managed to direct the PSDA show one last time. He has left us a lasting legacy in high standards, club goal setting, and promotion of best practices, leadership, and innovative thinking.