

San Leandro

DAHLIA TIMES

Editor: Sue Gregori

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Dazzling Dahlias at the Autumn Lights Festival
By Kristi Whitfield (San Leandro Dahlia Society)

In late September, our society was invited to set up a light display in the dahlia garden (where I grow) at Lake Merritt for the Autumn Lights Festival. The Autumn Lights Festival is the annual fundraiser for the non-profit group that helps fund improvements at the garden. In 2017 the festival raised over \$100,000 for future projects. It runs for 3 consecutive nights in mid-October and features artists who specialize in illuminated art pieces.

We had about two weeks notice and that didn't give us much time to pull it off. I put out the word before our October meeting that I needed lights (and help), and many members stepped up to contribute. Deva Lowenthal, Marilyn Fong and Dawn Watts all brought lights to the meeting a few days after I sent out the email request for help.

The day after the meeting was setup for the festival and I was relieved that Deva and Beverley Dahlstedt agreed to help. I brought some lights, Deva brought some lights and John Morton had dropped off some lights at the garden before we arrived. We found his lights hidden in the nearby bushes. We agreed on an idea and started stringing the lights. Our design/plan was to wrap 11 stakes with lights and then attach some lighted round baskets to the tops of 4 stakes to resemble ball-shaped flowers. My plan was to run them all on a single wire and plug them in to the long extension cord I brought. While we were getting organized, a festival worker dropped off our Honda generator.

Not long after we started, Sue Gregori rolled in on a utility cart driven by one of the festival workers and unloaded a half dozen boxes of lights, electrical supplies and other design tools. It was like a miracle. It ends up she's an expert in outdoor holiday light displays and had all the know-how and equipment to pull it off. She quickly sized up the situation and explained how my design was destined for electrical burnout or fire and redesigned the display so it would be safe and functional. She brought almost all the electrical infrastructure we needed to make it work. She also brought some circular metal baskets that we used for the flower balls. At that point, we were only missing the right gauge of long extension cord, but we pressed on with the light stringing.

We were almost done when in walked Guy Chibante with some beautiful butterfly lights and a few lighted giant flat flowers. It was just the finishing touches that we needed. He set the butterflies on top of the blooming camellias in the garden and attached the flat flowers to the big tree next to our section. I jokingly asked if he had a heavy duty extension cord in his car and amazingly he said "Yes". A second miracle. He brought in the cord and we finalized all the connections. He turned on the generator and we plugged in the main cord. It wasn't totally dark, but we could see that it all worked and looked pretty good.

The show opened the following night and several members were able to attend on the different nights. On Thursday night while I was plugging in, I was delighted to run into Deborah Dietz from San Francisco. She didn't know we had a light display, but had shown up to help Kevin Woodson sell his artwork at the artist's fair. From what I heard, there were about 10,000 people each night. It was another successful fundraising event.

I realized after we set up that I was going to be gone on Sunday for the break down, so again I called around for help. Sue, Guy and John agreed to help and got everything torn down and separated in record time on Sunday.

Many thanks to everyone who helped make the Dazzling Dahlia display such a great success! It was truly a team effort and a resounding success for the society. Good work!

