

A monarch butterfly
perched on a classic
Elise dahlia in Palmer's
tennis court garden

FRANCES PALMER

HOW HER GARDEN GROWS

Avid gardener and potter Frances Palmer has two gorgeous cutting gardens, a ceramics studio and three kilns on premise at her Weston, CT, residence.

She's become renowned for her heirloom dahlias and the beautiful pottery she creates to display them. Home editor STEPHANIE HORTON recently sat down with Palmer to discuss her process, inspiration and advice.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JANE BEILES



Palmer and her rescue dog Peter in the doorway of her ceramics studio and (below) a view of the studio from beyond the gardens.



Frances Palmer could be referred to as the Martha Stewart of the potting world, known as a leader in the field, for both her ceramic pieces, as well as her majestic dahlias she puts in them. And in fact, Martha Stewart is a fan (and former neighbor) of hers. Over the years, she's developed a unique perspective on her gorgeous garden, pictured here in full bloom.

Can you tell us a little about your process for growing dahlias and what challenges are inherent with tubers?

Growing dahlias as a process is a pretty straightforward affair. You don't have to go crazy like I do planting so many different kinds and digging them up every year. You can just leave them in the ground to die and buy new ones each season, much the way you grow tulips. But the benefit of digging them up is they increase in size every year. In a season, one tuber (which looks like a sweet potato) can multiply into three or four.

You have a beautiful Instagram feed (@francespalmer) where you post daily flower arrangements in pottery you've created photographed against a dramatic black background. What do you enjoy most about this process?

I've always been interested in photography, and, at one point, wanted to go to school for printmaking. Instagram has changed things—it is so fun! It's like a diary that anyone who is interested can see. Rather than having the flowers sitting in the garden, I can bring them to a larger audience.

How are pottery making, gardening and cooking all similar for you?

There is something inherent in the processes of all these things that I really enjoy. The philosophies are similar. I love working with my hands and the transformation



Café Au Lait and Fire Magic dahlias are staked in tomato cages in the garden.

The studio displays Palmer's myriad creations of porcelain, creamware and terra cotta. She works here daily to fill orders and experiment with new forms.





Palmer in her cutting garden and (below) holding a sherwood peach dahlia



Apple cake served on Frances Palmer plates and garnished with zinnias and a Lady Darlene dahlia



Terra cotta vessels by Frances Palmer



Zinnias and sherwood peach, kidd climax and meadowburn Jane Cowl dahlias in a cutting basket

process. When I make a pot, it gets fired, glazed and transformed in the kiln. In the garden, so many variables come into play, such as the weather. Same with cooking; you use the same recipe but it can turn out different each time depending on the ingredients. I enjoy the interplay between what I can control and what I can't.

What material and product range do you cover with your pottery?

I'm a functional potter so I hope to make something people can use— vases, serving pieces. I work with three different clays: low-fire white earthenware (creamware), terra cotta and high-fire translucent porcelain, which fires in a gas kiln up to 2,300 degrees so it vitrifies and becomes like glass. I also have two electric kilns and a pottery wheel for each type of clay.

What's on the horizon for Frances Palmer?

This is my second year keeping bees. I wanted them to pollinate the flowers, and I thought it was such a happy environment for them. My assistant Joan Nichols has been helping me, and it's fascinating. We got some honey this year. I've also been taking classes in kintsugi, the Japanese art of repairing ceramics with gold, which could show up in my work. I'm always teaching workshops and hosting garden events (highlighted on the website, francespalmerpottery.com), and a book is not out of the question. 🍯