

How to Grow Dahlias

by Donna M. Lane

Dahlias come in 21 different forms. Some look like stars, others like balls or water lilies, while still others are very formal or somewhat wild-looking. They come in every color of the rainbow except blue and green, and in sizes from less than 2-inches in diameter to over 10 inches. Dahlias are one of the few flowers that give your garden incredible color from mid-July through frost, and they are very easy to grow. There's definitely something for everyone in the dahlia family!

Some people feel that dahlias are "too much work" because they have to be lifted and stored at the end of the season. To me, they are worth the effort. But, if you don't want to dig them up, you can just buy new stock the following season.

Soil Preparation and Planting. Dahlias need a sunny location to thrive. An area that receives at least 8 hours of direct sunlight is best; however, while dahlias will grow in more shaded locations (5 to 6 hours of sun) they will flower later than those receiving more sunlight. For best results, dahlias should be planted about the same time you would plant your vegetable garden – at the end of May in Zone 6. You can plant them in your garden, in mixed borders, in raised beds or in containers.

The ground should be warm (soil temperature of 60 degrees is ideal) and well drained at planting time, and your soil should be slightly acidic (6.5 pH). If you have heavy soil you will achieve better drainage by adding sand, peat moss or dehydrated cow manure to lighten and loosen the soil texture. Add a small handful of bone meal in the planting hole and work it in well before planting your tubers. Make sure that you do not amend your soil with any product that has been treated for weeds. Lay your tubers horizontally, 4-6" deep, and 24-36" apart and cover with soil. Be sure to add a stake when planting along with a label noting the variety, type and color.

Watering. Do not water the tuber after you have planted it. Wait until you see a green sprout before watering. After dahlias are established, a deep watering one to two times a week is necessary during the heat of summer. If your dahlias sulk in hot weather and you have watered properly, don't worry. Contrary to popular belief, dahlias don't love extreme heat. They

like warm days and cool nights, which is why they are spectacular in early fall.

Starting Dahlias Indoors. If you prefer to start your dahlias indoors rather than planting directly into the ground, use any good potting mix (one without moisture control or fertilizer added) as a planting medium and amend it with bone meal. The mix should be slightly damp, **not wet**, because dahlias can rot or develop poorly if the soil is too wet at planting. Start your dahlias about six weeks before you plan to plant them outside. Plant each tuber about 3” deep, keeping the neck of the tuber above the soil. Once the shoots start to emerge, you can add more soil and cover the tuber. Keep your pot in a warm place (60 or more degrees).

Make sure to harden off your dahlias before transplanting them into your garden. Plants should be about 12” tall (or less) when you move them outdoors. If the plants are over 12” high and have three sets of leaves, pinch out the center before transplanting them. When transplanting your dahlias, set the plant no deeper than 6”. The roots will become established in about one week. Be sure to keep the plants watered until the roots are established. Once your dahlias are established, care for them as you would with tubers planted directly in the ground.

Fertilizer. Some dahlia growers say that dahlias require a low nitrogen fertilizer, believing that fish emulsion, compost or high nitrogen fertilizers promote weak stems, small blooms and tubers that rot in storage. I have not found this to be true. Other growers recommend using high potassium and phosphorous fertilizers such as a 5-10-10, 10-20-20, or 0-20-20. I suggest using a balanced fertilizer, such as 10-10-10 or 20-20-20. Your first applications should be within 15 days of planting and repeated again 4 weeks later. One of the biggest mistakes people make is over-fertilization. If your soil is good, minimum feeding is needed. Stop feeding your dahlias at the end of August so the plant’s energy will go into making strong tubers.

Topping and Disbudding. To promote shorter, bushier plants with better stems for cutting, pinch out the center shoot (the leader) just above the third set of leaves. If you want bigger flowers, pinch out the buds at every other node so the energy will go into the remaining buds. If you want as many flowers as possible, don’t disbud your plants!

Weed Control. The roots of dahlias are very shallow, so hand weeding is the only type of weed control you should ever use. Do not use any type of herbicides, or your dahlias will not survive. Do not use a bark mulch for your dahlias; it inhibits the soil from getting warm. The best mulch I've found is salt marsh hay. Pine needles also work well.

Pests & Problems

SNAILS & SLUGS – Use slug bait or remove the last two sets of leaves to make it more difficult for slugs to climb to their dinner.

SPIDER MITES – If you note the bottom leaves of your plants turning brown, remove and destroy these leaves and spray the remaining leaves and their undersides with cold water. Mites like hot, dry conditions. If you have an infestation, remove and destroy the plant. Do not compost it!

EARWIGS – Check the flowers in early morning or at dusk. Bring a pail of soapy water and flick the earwigs into the water. Check their favorite white and yellow flowers first. They generally hide inside the flowers.

POTATO LEAFHOPPER – If you see ants on your dahlia stems, check the undersides of the leaves. The beige leafhoppers congregate on the ribs, sucking the juices from the leaf. Remove and destroy affected leaves.

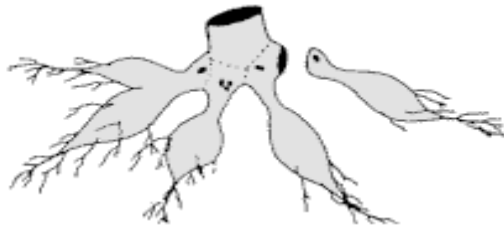
POWDERY MILDEW – This can be a problem if you plant your dahlias too close together, or if you have a particularly steamy summer. While the dahlia foliage will be unsightly, it will not affect the tubers. ZeroTol will eliminate powdery mildew from ornamental plants. (Do not, however, use it on food crops.)

Deadheading. Deadheading is the process of removing spent flowers. The more you deadhead, the more flowers your plants will produce. Deadhead old blooms and those with blown centers. This will keep your plants strong and blooming late into the season. NOTE: Keep a few flowers on the plants that have blown their centers to attract bees; they will only gather pollen from open-centered dahlias.

Digging, Dividing and Storing Tubers. Tubers dug too early are still "green" and will not store well. Digging should start two weeks after a killing frost. (It is safe to dig by late-October/early-November without a frost as long as the plants have been in the ground for 120 days.) Cut the stalk to about 6"

and leave the tubers in the ground for one to two weeks. This helps the tubers to “cure”. Carefully lift tubers with a spade or pitchfork so as not to break their necks. Wash the dirt from the roots with a gentle spray and allow them to air dry in a protected area for 24 hours. Label with a special marking pen (ink in a pencil) directly on your tubers, or make sure you attach the appropriate label to your clumps. If your tubers are dry, you can use a fine, black Sharpie marking pen to write on the tubers.

Clumps can be divided in the fall or in the spring. They are easier to divide in the fall, but eyes are more pronounced in the spring. If eyes are difficult to see in the fall, divide the clump into halves or quarters using a sharp knife. The eyes will be located on the collar of the main stalk. Each root must have an eye in order to grow, but not all tubers will have an eye. Cut surfaces should be allowed to dry overnight before storing. Different varieties will produce different sizes and shapes of tubers and some varieties do not store well no matter what you do!



To store your tubers or clumps, use a storage medium such as horticultural vermiculite or pet bedding material such as cedar shavings. Tubers should be stored in crates or wax-coated cardboard boxes. Put your packing medium in the bottom of your box and layer tubers and medium until the container is full. Don't store tubers in sealed plastic bags; however, you can store them in perforated plastic bags – bags that have air holes for moisture to escape. Store in a cool, dry area that does not freeze. Ideal storage temperatures are between 40 and 50 degrees (42 degrees is best). Check your tubers once a month throughout the winter. If the air is too warm and dry, tubers will shrivel; if the area is too cold, they will freeze and rot. If they appear to be drying out, mist your medium with warm water. If they are rotting, remove the rotted tubers and dry out your medium so the other tubers are not affected. This storage technique is only one of many. If you use a different method of storage and it works for you, stick with it!

Ben Lawrence of the Colorado Dahlia Society has put together an excellent pictorial on Digging, Dividing, and Storing Dahlia Tubers. You can access it at http://www.coloradodahlias.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/CDS_Culture.pdf This is primarily geared to people who want to divide their tubers in the fall. If you are nervous about dividing your clumps, I provide individual hands-on workshops for dividing and potting up tubers. Contact me for pricing or to schedule an appointment.

Conditioning Flowers. The best time to cut your flowers is in the cool of the morning. Place the cut stems in 2-3" of tepid or room temperature water and allow them to sit several hours in a dark place. This will set your blooms and make your flowers last for about 4 days (depending on the variety). Blooms that are slightly immature will last longer than those at perfect maturity.

If you need clarification of any phase of growing or storing dahlias, there are many good how-to videos on U-tube. If you have a specific question, you can send me an email at AddictedGardener@verizon.net.

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