

Growing Dahlias Successfully

What is a dahlia?

- A dahlia is not a daffodil (a bulb). A dahlia is not a potato. It is a **root tuber**. When you are growing a dahlia you are not only nurturing a plant to produce attractive blooms; you are also nurturing a plant to make additional tubers for harvest in the fall.

Where should you plant them?

- Some place with at least 6-8 hours of direct sunlight...more is better in our area
- Some place protected from the wind
- Some place with these soil characteristics:
 - Good drainage—dahlias need a lot of water but do not like to sit in water
 - Slightly acidic—pH 6.5 to 7.0
- Some place you can easily add compost to
- Some place you can control how much water the plants get
- Possible places
 - Existing flower beds with easy access—probably not a good idea to mix dahlia with other flowers
 - On their own in a raised bed or their own garden bed
 - In pots...but pots may have different fertilizer and water needs than garden beds—the pots have to be watered more frequently and that tends to wash out the fertilizer

When should you plant them?

- After all danger of frost is gone
- Depending on your specific site in our area, late April to early May
- Soil temperature must be 60 degrees.
- The soil should be relatively dry. Dahlia tubers can rot easily. Slightly damp is okay.

How should you plant them?

- Plants should be spaced about 2 to 3 feet apart.
- If you are planting dahlias in rows, consider mounding each row.
- Make a hole 4 to 6 inches deep with a hand rake.
- Use stakes or tomato cages (3') for plant support. Dahlias can be top heavy when they have blooms.
- Place the tuber horizontally in the hole with the eye pointed skyward.
- Fill the hole partially or completely depending on the tuber.
- It helps to know exactly where your tubers are after you have planted them.

Should you fertilize them?

- Recommendations for fertilizing dahlias are varied and sometimes contradictory.
- Too much fertilizer is not good for dahlias.
- A soil test can give you guidance in what you choose to do for fertilizing. Fall is a good time for a soil test.
- Nitrogen—you may need some but not too much. Too much nitrogen is not good for tuber development.
- Phosphorus—you may not need any of this nutrient. Too much phosphorus in the soil can be a problem.
- When you first plant dahlia tubers there are no roots to absorb nutrients.
- If you do decide to fertilize your dahlias, do so twice during the growing season—mid-June and mid-July.
- Do not fertilize after July. Fertilizer late in the growing season is not good for tuber development.
- Dahlias grown in pots have different fertilizing needs.

How should you water them?

- Do not water until your plants are at least 4 inches high.
- Once the plants are growing well, water infrequently but deeply.
- Water at ground level. Overhead watering is inefficient and may damage dahlia flowers.
- Dahlias grown in pots will need more frequent watering.

What pests and other problems do you have to worry about?

- Slugs and snails. Use a pet-safe product to control them.
- Aphids. These can spread fungal and viral diseases. It's best to use the "el kabaski" method to eliminate them.
- Earwigs. These eat other pests as well as parts of the plant. There is no recommended chemical control. Keep your dahlia area clean and uncluttered.
- Voles and other critters.
- Dahlias are very susceptible to all forms of herbicides.
- Diagnosing fungal and viral diseases in dahlias is difficult.
- The symptoms of these diseases are often the same as various environmental issues—fertilizing, watering, etc.
- Diseased dahlias must be removed from the garden and disposed of in the garbage.

What you should do as they are growing?

Grooming options

- Stopping/topping/pinching—this is a very common practice. It can delay blooming.
- Disbudding—this is done mostly for growing dahlias for show competition or longer stems.
- Disbranching—this may be necessary for good air circulation and disease control.

Weeding

- Dahlia roots are very close to the surface. Weeds will compete with dahlias for soil nutrients.
- "Hand weeding is the only type of weed control you should ever use, there are no exceptions. Do not use any type of herbicides, your dahlias will not survive." [Swan Island Dahlias]
- Provide additional support with stakes and/or string as dahlias grow taller.
- Rain can damage taller plants and plants with large flowers.
- ***Deadhead dahlias relentlessly for continuous blooming.*** Cut down to the next set of leaves.

What should you do after they stop blooming?

Dahlias will bloom until the frost destroys them. You have three options for what to do with your dahlias over the winter.

Leave them in the ground.

- You must have planted them in soil that drains well.
- Cut them off at ground level.
- Protect the open stalk from rain water. Large nursery pots work well for this.
- You may still have to dig and divide dahlias every two or three years.

Dig them. Before digging:

- Cut off each dahlia, leaving about 6-12 inches of stalk remaining.
- Do this in mid-October if the dahlias have not yet been hit by frost. This can take a while if you used tomato cages.
- Label each stalk.
- Let the dahlias "cure" or "ripen" for one to two weeks.
- Shovel vs. digging fork—largely dependent on the nature of the soil.
- Lift by the stalk gently. ***Don't pull and don't shake.*** It's easy to break the necks of the tubers.
- Rinse as much dirt as possible from the dahlia clumps.
- Store them in a covered area protected from frost so they can dry.
- Do not store them on bare concrete.

Store the clumps for dividing in the spring.

- This approach requires a dark space where the temperature is between 40 and 50 degrees.
- Do not store dahlias directly on concrete—they will dry out.

- Do not let the clumps touch each other.
- Inspect the dahlias periodically during the winter. Look for rotting, shriveling, or rodent issues.
- Dividing dahlias in the spring makes it easier to see the “eyes” on the tubers than it is in the fall. But the dahlias are harder to cut in the spring.

Divide the clumps to store the tubers separately.

- The eyes will be more difficult to spot than they are in the spring, but the tubers will cut more easily.
- Label each tuber.
- Store the tubers in a dark area between 40 and 50 degrees. Do not let them touch each other.
- Inspect the dahlias periodically during the winter. Look for rotting, shriveling, or rodent issues.
- Read “Digging, Dividing, and Storing Tubers” from the American Dahlia Society. You’ll find it under “Dahlia University” listed under “Grow” on the ADS home page. You will also find an article on the plastic wrap method of storing tubers here.
- It is easy to find YouTube videos about digging and dividing dahlias. **WARNING:** You may see a lot of pulling and shaking.

Dahlia Varieties

- There are over 60,000 dahlia cultivars (individually named plants) for garden use.
- The American Dahlia Society lists almost 11,000 individual dahlias.
- These dahlias are divided into 17 different “forms” (flower shape).
- Six of these forms account for 75% of all the dahlias listed by the ADS.
 - **Decorative—most common**
 - **Informal Decorative—third most common**
 - Cactus
 - **Semi-Cactus—second most common**
 - Incurved Cactus
 - Laciniated
- These six forms are divided into six different groups by the size of the flower.
 - Giant (AA) 10-12 inches 120 days
 - Large (A) 8-10 inches
 - Medium (B) 6-8 inches 90 days
 - Small (BB) 4-6 inches
 - Miniature (M) up to 4 inches
 - Micro (MC) up to 2 inches
 - Medium and small dahlias account for 50% of the dahlias listed by the American Dahlia Society.

There are 11 other dahlia varieties.

- Ball, Mini Ball, and Pompon
- Stellar
- Waterlily
- Novelty Double
- Novelty Open
- Peony
- Anemone
- Collarette
- Orchid
- Orchette
- Single, Mignon Single

Dahlia Colors

- Colors of dahlias can vary in intensity due to soil conditions (nutrients), weather, and humidity.
- Color photographs—especially for red and purple dahlias—are inconsistent in their accuracy.

White	Dark Pink	Purple / Black	Dark Blend
Yellow	Red	Light Blend	Variegated
Orange	Dark Red	Bronze	Bicolor
Pink	Lavender	Flame	

Dahlia cultivars differ in...

- ...how long they take to develop eyes
- ...how tall they grow.
- ...how strong their stems are.
- ...how many blooms they develop.
- ...how long their blooms last.
- ...how many tubers they produce.
- ...how they react to hot or cool weather.
- ...how disease resistant they are.
- ...how good for storage their tubers are.

Where can you get dahlias?

- Use Dahlia Addict (dahliaaddict.com) for mail order dahlia suppliers.
- Dahlia prices do not reflect the quality of the tuber—a \$6 tuber and a \$26 tuber should have the same quality.
- Do not rely too much on one color photograph of a dahlia.
- Big box stores and some nurseries sell dahlia clumps, not individual tubers.

Where can you get reliable information about dahlias?

- American Dahlia Society (dahlia.org)
- Information on commercial growers' websites.
 - Dahlia Barn / Dahlia Care
 - Lobaugh's / Learn
 - Summer Dreams Farm / Dahlia Care
 - Swan Island Dahlias / Help Center
- Kristine Albrecht YouTube videos

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