

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener  
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In western Washington, the dahlia is a diva among flowers, perfectly suited to our temperate weather and providing color long after the summer annuals have faded. Most dahlia varieties will bloom right up until the first killing frost. And beneath the soil's surface, they grow a large clump of tubers from the original one, similar in many ways to the way a potato plant grows.

In Skagit County's mild climate, digging and storing your dahlia tubers isn't always necessary. Given a planting depth of six inches, plus a few inches of mulch, most dahlia tubers should weather our climate USDA zones 7 and 8 quite well. But, when you consider the other reasons for digging your tubers each fall, it pays to know how to do it right.

Digging, separating, and storing your dahlia tubers provides two important benefits:

- It keeps the plant from becoming "tuber-bound"; that is, generating so many new tubers that the plant eventually becomes little more than a mass of foliage with a few small flowers—and nearly impossible to separate out
- It allows you to share your favorite varieties with family and friends

Almost every dahlia gardener has a different method for processing dahlia tubers for winter storage (consider them variations on a theme), but there are several common guidelines to follow.

When the first fall frost kills the foliage, cut it off to within about six inches from the ground, then cover the remaining stalks with tinfoil to prevent rain from getting into the hollow stalks and rotting the tubers. Let the tubers sit in the ground for two weeks to "cure," which will help to prevent rot during storage.

Dig up the tuber clumps and wash the dirt off them with a firm jet of water from your hose. Don't spray too hard; you don't want to break the fragile necks of the tubers. Lay the tuber clumps on newspapers on your garage floor or other freeze-safe zone to dry for one or two days (don't lay the tubers directly on concrete; it will draw the moisture out of the tubers themselves—rapidly).

In a zipper-lock plastic bag, prepare a mixture of 50 percent powdered sulfur and 50 percent peat moss, vermiculite, or sand. This will be used to dust the tubers after you cut them away from the main clump, which will help to prevent rot during storage.

Using a sharp paring knife or hooked-blade knife, carefully cut the tubers away from the main clump, taking care to include a growth eye with each tuber. Identifying the growth eye can be difficult for many people, however. Look for a small, pale bump about half the size of a BB at the end of the tuber that's closest to the main portion of the clump. That's the growth eye, from which a new stalk will sprout.

After you've cut away all the tubers you can, write the variety name on each tuber with a permanent marker, then place the tubers in the plastic bag with your 50/50 mixture of sulfur and peat moss or other medium. Toss the tubers a couple times and remove them.

Wrap the tubers in successive turns of plastic shrink wrap, taking care not to let any tuber touch another directly. Write the variety name on a plant label and slip it into the packet after you add the last tuber. Store the packets of tubers in your refrigerator or any other area where the temperature will stay somewhere in the 40s. Remember, if the tubers freeze, the game's over. And although wrapping the tubers in plastic wrap seems counterintuitive, it's actually quite effective and doesn't contribute to rot

If you can't bring yourself to wrap the tubers in plastic, store them in a loose, barely moist, non-soil medium, such as peat moss, sawdust, sand, or vermiculite. But take care to monitor the tubers during the winter so they don't dry out; to prevent drying, you may need to sprinkle a little water on the storage medium from time to time. And this bears repeating: Do *not* store your tubers in soil! You will fool them into thinking it's time to start growing. Come spring, you'll have a tangled mess of thin, pale stalks—and little chance that the plants will survive in your garden.

You can certainly save a tuber for replanting that same fall, just make sure you get it down at least four inches deep (preferably six inches), and do not add any nitrogen to the soil (nitrogen promotes weak stems and can lead to rot during storage the following fall). And don't water it in, either; there will be plenty of that during the winter months.

The rest of the tubers can wait till spring.

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This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Extension, 306 S. First Street, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.

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