

Dahlia Delights

By Kathy Wolfe
August 14, 2015



Embrace these flowers for a summer of bold blooms

Dahlias are not a bashful plant. Indeed, they explode in bright oranges, yellows, reds, purples, pinks and bronzes. Sorry, no blues. Flower forms vary greatly, but each carries one head per stem. Some flowers can be as small as 2" across or as large as 1' "dinner plate" size). Plant heights range from 10" to over 8'.

Because there are so many forms of dahlias, classification codes are often used to group similar types to simplify identification. Classifications include Anemone, Ball, Cactus, Collarett, Double Orchid, Fimbriated, Formal Decorative, Novelty, Peony Flowered, Pompon, Semi-Cactus, Single, Star and Waterlily.

You can buy dahlias as tubers, rooted cuttings or full grown plants. Low growing or dwarf varieties can be started with tubers under artificial light in containers in late February. Container size should be no smaller than 12" x 12" per tuber. Leave the artificial light on for 15 hours per day, apply liquid fertilizer at half strength each week and pinch off terminal growth for bushy, compact plants. Stop pinching a month before your last frost. Flowers should appear in another month and the plant can then be moved outdoors to bloom from late June to frost.

To plant directly outdoors, wait until the soil has warmed and all danger of frost has passed before setting out tubers. Here in Western Washington, this usually means mid-April to mid-May. Find a sunny location with well-drained soil and dig a deep, wide hole. Dahlias bloom best when they receive eight hours of sun per day.

Work in compost and a handful of bone meal and low nitrogen fertilizer (5-10-10 or any marked for use on vegetables) and mix well. Plant tubers horizontally, 4" – 6" deep and 18" – 24" apart, depending on the size of your dahlia plant. Make sure the growing point or eye is facing upward.

If a plant matures to taller than 2', pound a stake in the soil about 2" from the eye. If you wait to add the support stake later, you risk puncturing the tuber. Plants over 3' will need some kind of support, whether a tomato cage, metal rod or bamboo stake. Do not water the newly planted tuber; wait until growth appears above the ground. Once the plant is above ground, sprinkle on slug bait. After growth reaches 6", water regularly to keep the soil evenly moist.

Every six weeks work a mixture of 2 cups alfalfa meal and a cup of fertilizer around the drip line of the plant. Deadhead spent blossoms often for continued bloom; your dahlia should keep blossoming all summer long.



Dahlias complement each other in this mixed arrangement. *Photo by Kathy Wolfe / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners.*

For a bushier, shorter plant that will produce better stems for cutting, pinch plants when they reach 18”– 20”. Hand weed around the plants. Never apply an herbicide, as this is detrimental to your dahlia tuber.

Keep slugs and snails away from your dahlia, and watch for any spider mite activity and control as necessary. As temperatures rise and humidity increases, you may see signs of mildew. Catch this as early as possible. Ask your extension agent or other informed source which product will work best for you and your garden.

Dahlia Mosaic virus can cause deformed leaves and discoloration. Control this disease by planting tolerant varieties. Control aphids that can spread the disease. Keep healthy plants away from diseased ones.

Dahlias make long-lasting, beautiful flowers. Cut mature blooms in early morning or in the cool of evening for longest vase life. Use a sharp knife, so the water-carrying tubes are not crushed. Cut at least eight hours before you intend to display them and place the stems in deep, cold water

in a cool, draft-less room. If you can, cut off an inch of each stem under water for longevity of bloom.

In mild climates you can leave dahlias in the ground, as long as your soil is well drained and mulch is deeply applied to protect them from frost damage. However, if dahlias are left in the ground for several years, the clumps continue to increase in size, sending out more shoots each spring, thereby weakening stems and reducing flower size. Digging and dividing allows you to protect your tubers from the elements, increase your stock, rejuvenate plants, and share them with friends.

When digging up dahlias in the fall, wait for the plant to be blackened by frost or cold rains before lifting them from the ground for storage. First, cut the stems to six inches and wait a week before digging. This allows time for the eyes of the plant to develop. Place your shovel or fork away from the base of the plant so that you don't accidentally cut the tubers below. Lift out tubers carefully and allow them to dry in open air away from direct sunlight for a few hours.

Store tubers in a cool, dry, frost-free place. Several different mediums are often recommended in which to store them. Check with your local master gardener or other reliable source to determine which method is right for you.

Dahlias not only add sparkle to garden beds and provide beautiful cut blossoms summer through late fall but also, in the depths of winter, just looking at a dahlia catalog will lift your spirit as you dream of a summer in technicolor.



Left: A rawhide dahlia is a waterlily variety in variegated pink. **Right:** White pompon dahlias are almost perfectly spherical. Note how the petals are curved inward to create the flower's tight form. *Photos by Trish Varrelman / WSU Skagit County Masters*

RESOURCES:

- "Dahlia Culture." Ray McNeilan. Fact Sheet 95. Oregon State University Extension Service. Reprinted 2000.
<http://ir.library.oregonstate.edu/xmlui/bitstream/handle/1957/16955/fs95.pdf>

- “How to Dig, Divide and Store Your Dahlias.” Richard Parshall. Snohomish County Dahlia Society.
<http://www.scdahlias.org/howto/index.cgi?howto=digdivide>
- “Tips on Planting Dahlia Tubers.” Ciscoe Morris. The Seattle Times. April 25, 2012.
<http://www.seattletimes.com/lifestyle/tips-on-planting-dahlia-tubers/>
- “Growing Dahlias.” Puget Sound Dahlia Association.
<http://www.pugetsounddahlias.org/psda2.html>
- “How to Grow Dahlias.” Swan Island Dahlias.
<http://www.dahlias.com/howtogrowdahlias.aspx>