

# Overwintering Dahlias

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## Queen of the fall garden

Are you a gambling gardener? Late fall is the time to roll the dice to decide how to overwinter your dahlias, queen of the fall garden.

If we lived in zones 8-10, where winter temperatures rarely dip below 20 degrees F, we would cut the plants to the ground and call it good. In zone 7 we may be able to leave them successfully if the winter is temperate and water doesn't funnel into the tubers causing rot. Unlike the hardier bulbs, tubers are thin-skinned and will be destroyed if a freeze reaches a depth of 6" in your garden.

If you are willing to place your bet that your dahlias will tough it out in your well-drained soil, you can rejoice when they make it through or treat your dahlias as annuals and plant a fresh bunch in the spring. Many Pacific Northwest gardeners prefer to do this rather than to dig and store.

The following in-ground procedure will further safeguard your dahlias and requires only a few easy steps. After the first killing frost, which will blacken the stalks, or by mid-November (whichever comes first), cut the stalks to below ground level. Inspect the area where the stalk connects with the tuber and cut off any hollow stalk that remains until there are no tube-like protrusions that could catch and funnel water down into the plant. Now cover the dahlia area with plastic to keep the winter rains at bay. Add a few inches of mulch, soil, leaves, straw or compost over the area to add protection from severe cold. In March you can remove the extra layers of protection.

In spring when sprouts appear, you can leave the dahlias in the ground or choose to dig and divide the plants and get a jumpstart on the dahlia bloom season. Once you have carefully divided them (see description below), let the cuts seal overnight before planting in containers. Don't wait too long to replant or the tubers will become dehydrated.

Make sure each divided tuber contains an eye, the small white or pinkish swollen dot located around the base of the old stem. These eyes are the growing point for next year's stem. If you find a tuber without an eye or one growing out of another tuber, discard it because it is unlikely to produce a healthy new plant. Be sure to label your variety, as it is easy to forget when working with multiple plants.

Plant dahlias in potting soil or sand 2-3” deep about 6 weeks before you transplant them outside. Keep them in a warm area over 60 degrees F, in soil that is slightly damp but not wet. Transplant outside after all danger of frost is passed. If your start is over 12” tall, pinch it back before transplanting. Dig a hole that will place the tubers 6” deep. Add a handful of bone meal in each hole, followed by the tuber. It is a good idea to place your stakes in at this time so you won’t pierce the tubers if you place them later in the season. Place stakes about 2” from the tuber. Be sure to keep plants watered until the roots are established (approximately one week).



Dahlias will put on a spectacular show in your garden. *Photo by Nancy Crowell / WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardeners.*

So why go to the bother of digging, dividing and storing dahlias in the winter, as required in zones 3-6? If you have a few treasured dahlias you absolutely do not want to replace, or if you want to share a specific variety with family and friends, this method ensures a better survival rate. Also, if your plant is getting so entrenched that the tubers are growing too large, it may be getting “tuber-bound.” Separate them out before they become a tangled mess, the stems weak and the flowers small.

For those willing to take the time and effort to dig and store dahlias, the process includes the following:

After a hard frost or in mid-November, cut stalks to 6” above the ground. Wait at least a week before digging to force the eye of the plant to develop and make dividing easier.



**Left:** Dig your dahlias using a garden fork or shovel. Dig down on all four sides about a foot away and lift clumps carefully so their necks do not break. **Right:** Divide dahlia clumps using a sharp paring knife or hooked-blade knife. Carefully cut the tuber away from the main stalk, being sure you get an eye with each tuber. *Photos by Nancy Crowell / WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardeners.*

Dig your dahlias using a garden fork or shovel. Dig down on all four sides about a foot away and lift clumps carefully so their necks don't break. Wash off excess dirt using a garden hose and trim all feeder roots and long tapered roots. With a permanent marker, write the varietal name or code number on a tag or label—or directly on the tuber. Dry clumps overnight in a cool dry location. Do not leave them in the sun.

Divide your dahlia clumps using a sharp paring knife or hooked-blade knife. Carefully cut the tuber away from the main stalk, being sure you get an eye with each tuber. Cut surfaces should be dried overnight before storing.

Various storing mediums can be used. Some gardeners use mesh net bags, others store in peat moss, sand or pet bedding, e.g. sawdust/shavings. Do not use potting soil. Store in a cardboard box or line your containers with 10-12 sheets of newspaper. Store in a cool, dry area with temperatures between 40-60 degrees F. Tubers will shrivel if too warm or freeze/rot if too cold. Check them once a month throughout the winter and remove any rotting tubers. Moisten lightly with a spray bottle if they appear to be dehydrating.

Plant in the spring as described above, whether in the greenhouse or directly into the garden later.

The more you read about overwintering dahlias, the more opinions you will find, especially regarding the preparation of the tuber for storage, the storage medium and the storage container.

Use the tried and true method above or experiment yourself and find what works best for you. If any of the procedures here confuse you, there are many pictorials in books and online videos that can help you visualize the process.

Whatever you do, be sure you have plenty of spectacular dahlias to put on a show in your garden.

## **RESOURCES:**

- “How to dig, divide, and store your dahlias”, Richard Parshall, Snohomish County Extension. <http://scdahlias.org/200807/howto/digdivide.html>
- “How to Dig, Divide, and Store Dahlia Tubers”, Gary Junken, Fine Gardening video. [www.finegardening.com/article/how-to-dig-divide-and-store-dahlia-tubers](http://www.finegardening.com/article/how-to-dig-divide-and-store-dahlia-tubers)
- “Dahlia Storage Tips”, Jason Miller, Washington State University Extension, March 29, 2014. <https://s3.wp.wsu.edu/uploads/sites/2073/2014/03/102607.pdf>
- “Digging, Dividing and Storing Tubers”, Alan Fisher, The American Dahlia Society. <https://www.dahlia.org/docsinfo/articles/digging-dividing-and-storing-tubers/>
- “How to Grow Dahlias”, Swan Island Dahlias. <https://www.dahlias.com/howtogrowdahlias.aspx>

Note: some hyperlinks in this article have been updated since its initial publication.