

# Dahlia ID

by Carol Barany

Each May, my gardening friends gather to share our extra plants. Over the years they've come to learn all too well that if offer "named" dahlia tubers, there's a 50% chance that the variety they get is not what I thought it was.

I have the best of intentions. Yet despite 40 years of practice, keeping my dahlia tubers organized by variety has remained illusive. Somehow, the pink Collarettes turn out to be orange Pom Poms, and the purple balls are actually yellow Waterlilies. What a muddle.

My practice has been to write the dahlia variety on a plastic plant marker and stick it in the soil next to the dahlia stake on planting day. What could go wrong?

I know you can name at least a dozen reasons why this method will not reliably hold up through an active five-month-long growing season. I'm a slow learner. But that's about to change.



Yesterday, before the first hard freeze would make the flowers unrecognizable, I inspected each dahlia for ID. Three-quarters of the plants still had the plastic name marker in place. Unfortunately, not all of those tags matched the flower. I had one last chance at making things right.

I wrote the dahlia variety in permanent marker on a long length of 1" wide plastic flagging tape and tied it securely around a dahlia stalk at the base of every single plant. When it's time to lift the tubers for storage in a few weeks, the clump will already have ID it can wear during winter storage. What could go wrong?

I'll report back next spring.

In cold-winter areas like Yakima, tubers that are properly cured before they are dug up hold best in storage. If you pull dahlias up while they are still actively growing or immediately after a first frost, the skin on the tubers will not have time to toughen. I wait 10-14 days after our first hard frost has turned the plants to black mush and then start digging.

But don't wait too long. If your tubers freeze in the ground, they too will turn to black mush.

I leave all the staking (6' tall rebar driven 6" into the soil) and drip irrigation lines in place from year-to-year, and just do my best to work around it when I dig my dahlias. Removing all that paraphernalia is too much work and just creates another mess.

The first task is cut the frosted plants to the ground, leaving stems 4-6" long to act as "handles" on the clumps. I borrow my husband's 4-tine pitchfork for digging, since I'm more likely to slice through the clumps when I use a shovel. Our soil is usually fairly dry on digging day, and falls away from the clumps more easily when I use the fork.

Whatever tool you use, insert it 12" away from the center of the clump and rock it back and forth on all four sides of the plant. Be very careful when you lift the clump from the soil. The necks (the area of the tuber attached to the stem) are very fragile and breakable. If the neck is broken, the tuber is useless. Remove excess soil from the clump by GENTLY shaking off the excess, or use an old 3" paintbrush.

If you're new to dahlia growing, you may wonder what all the fuss is about. What you may not realize is that, where you once planted a single small tuber, there now is a nest of up to a dozen new tubers that developed this season. Dahlias are very good at reproducing.

Depending on how much time you have, you can wash, divide, and store the tubers now. I store mine in a cool frost-free place until mid-March, and do the division then. I don't wash the clumps now, since a light layer of soil offers them a measure of protection to prevent shriveling in our dry climate.

I already attached flagging tape ID to each clump. As soon as they come out of the ground, I'll plop the clumps into plastic grocery bags (no vermiculite or sawdust) labeled with the variety. Into my 114 year old unheated basement they go, where I arrange the open bags on shelves, about 3 bags deep, in what may once have been a dark root cellar. A steady temperature of 40-50 degrees, anywhere you provide it, is all they need.

Getting your dahlias into storage each fall settles them down for a long winter's nap. When they awaken, they'll need dividing, planting, staking, pinching, pruning, fertilizing, and irrigating.

Wisdom is found in a multitude of counselors. Whether you're an experienced grower or a new lover of dahlias, the American Dahlia Society, founded in 1915, has your back. You'll find everything you ever wanted to know about growing this extraordinary flower at [www.dahlia.org](http://www.dahlia.org).