

# Season End for Dahlias

By Carol Barany

**F**rost is one way nature brings the gardening season to an end. Honestly, there have been years when I prayed that Jack would arrive by mid-August, bringing early dormancy to the garden and a tired gardener.

This year, I wish this warm, glorious growing season would linger for months. The reality is that weather data warns us that the first frost could arrive here by mid-October, most likely on a night of clear skies and calm winds.

Our first frost date coincides with the shut down of the City of Yakima irrigation season, another milestone on the march toward the end.

One more month, and it could all be over.

What a year it's been. We've never grown better tasting, more picture-perfect tomatoes. I need another freezer to store all the roasted tomato sauce I've made. Last year, I had to buy boxes of tomatoes from the farm stand because our tomato harvest was so abysmal.

Out in the dahlia garden, I've forgotten all about the grumbling I do over the huge amount of time it takes to dig and store the tubers in the fall, and then divide, plant, and repeatedly stake and deadhead them all summer.

In these heady days, I'm thinking it was worth every minute. I'm cutting armloads of blooms filling dozens of bouquets I make each week. I know the honeymoon will be over come November, when the real work begins again. So while I'm still blindly in love with these demanding divas, I've got a short list of tasks to accomplish in the next few weeks.

I've learned from my friend Nancy that stripping the plant's lower leaves up to about 16" from the ground can improve air circulation and keep late-season powdery mildew at bay. Many of these leaves are brown or declining anyway, contributing nothing to photosynthesis, so why not get rid of them now?

Once dahlia plants are cut down by frost, they all look the same: black mush. Cross-check their ID tags now for accuracy.

This will give you a head start on the digging and storing process. In the next few weeks, while my dahlias are still blooming, I tie a length of plastic flagging tape to each clump. With a silver sharpie, I'll write the variety name, or at least a good description. Some of the flags will be marked "loser", reminding me which dahlias are not worth growing again next year. When I dig the clumps for storage, they'll already have an ID label attached that can go into storage.

I've got a bookcase full of dahlia gardening books, but Kristine Albrecht's newly released 'Dahlias: Seed to Bloom' is the best. Kristine is a well-known dahlia breeder in Santa Cruz, California. Rooted cuttings of her creations, such as 'KA's Mocha Blush', 'KA's Mocha Katie', and 'KA's Rosie Jo', sell out the day they're offered at a much anticipated online sale.

I learned something absolutely game-changing from that book.

For as long as I've grown dahlias, I've waited a week or two after a killing frost to dig the tubers. It's a widespread belief that this is necessary for successful winter storage. Albrecht and many other growers garden in warm or tropical climates that never get frost. She points out that "they dig and divide tubers just fine."

Dr. Keith Hammett, an international dahlia expert, grows 10,000 to 20,000 dahlias each year for his breeding program in the warm, semi-tropical climate of New Zealand's North Island. He agrees with Albrecht that frost has nothing to do with the right time to dig dahlia tubers. He confirms that "tuber production is a consequence of day length. Frost is irrelevant. Day length is the determinant."

Albrecht explains that as the days start growing shorter at the summer solstice, increasingly longer nights trigger dahlias into tuber development. She starts digging and dividing about 75 to 90 days after the summer solstice. Waiting any longer would put her into digging during the rainy season, a mess she prefers to avoid. Keep in mind that weather in Santa Cruz allows her to plant about a month earlier than we do here in Yakima.

According to Albrecht, you can dig up tubers after your plants have been growing for a minimum of 135 days. She agrees that there is nothing wrong with waiting for frost. But contrary to popular advice, it's not a requirement.

Every dahlia grower can learn something from Kristine. She's posted over 200 dahlia growing videos on YouTube. Betcha can't watch just one.