

Growing and Caring for Dahlias

Dahlias come in sizes pincushion to dinnerplate, styles open to tight and full, and colors from white to yellow, to reds and purples." Here are the basics to successfully growing dahlias:

- Buy quality tubers: A poor tuber will most likely give you a weak plant and blooms.
- Where to plant: Dahlias need about 6 hours of sun a day and should be planted 1 to 2 feet apart.
- When to plant: Depending on your region, from mid-April on. The tuber won't start growing until the soil warms to 60 degrees.
- Soil: Dahlias need soil that drains well. If your soil is heavy in clay, amend it with sand and/or peat moss. You can also add a little bone meal, alfalfa meal, and rotted manure. Do not add a high nitrogen fertilizer as this leads to poor stems and lack of blooms. An example of a commercial fertilizer would be a 5-10-10.
- How to plant: The tuber should be planted horizontally with the eye up if it is visible. Plant 4 to 6 inches deep and do not water until the sprout shows above the soil. Stakes can also be added at this time.
- Stopping: When the plant has 3 to 4 sets of leaves the central stem should be pinched out. This will cause the plant to create two main stems instead of one, thus giving you a better shaped plant and many more blooms.
- Disbudding: This is the practice of removing the secondary buds to maximize the size of the central or terminal bud. This is important to do for two reasons: to get a quality bloom and to lengthen the stem to be practical for cut flowers. Disbud when the side buds are "pea" sized or even smaller.
- Tying: Once the plants have a foot or so of growth, tie to the stake with twine. You may have to do this more than once as the plant grows.
- Water: In our region deep watering twice a week is a good general practice.
- Fall storage: In Eastern Washington tubers must be dug up and stored to protect from freezing. Cut the plant down after the first frost and let set for a week. Then dig up, wash and let them dry off for several days. The tuber will have multiplied over the summer and they need to be separated for storage. When cutting tubers look for eyes for next year's growth. Not all tubers will have eyes. Most growers store tubers in boxes layered with wood chips (not cedar). The optimal temperature for storage is from 42 to 50 degrees.