



WSU EXTENSION

Chelan/Douglas County

Master Gardener Program

Growing Dahlias East of the Cascades

Purchasing Dahlia Tubers

Dahlia plants grow from tubers planted in the ground like potatoes. They are not bulbs or rhizomes. Some dahlias are grown from seed and new varieties are usually developed from seed. Seed from named dahlias will not produce the same blooms as the parent but will be a mixture of the color and characteristics of the parents of that plant. Therefore, it is necessary to plant a tuber or a cutting of a particular variety in order to have flowers of that variety.

Buy dahlia tubers from reputable dahlia growers or nurseries. Quality makes a difference. Consider purchasing dahlia tubers from a local dahlia society. Reputable sources, such as dahlia societies often have sought after varieties and knowledgeable people to answer questions.

Buy tubers with visible eyes located at the stem end of the tuber, called the crown. Unlike potatoes which have eyes all over, dahlia tuber eyes are only found near the end where the tuber attaches to the plant stem. The tuber should have an eye showing. The eyes can be difficult to spot so ask the seller or an expert to locate the eye for you. Buy plump, healthy looking tubers with no sign of decay.

Planting Tubers - When, Where, How

For best results, dahlias need a sunny location to thrive. An area that receives 6-8 hours of direct sunlight is best. They do best in a sandy loam that is slightly acidic but will grow successfully in any type of soil that is well drained. Tubers can be planted from mid-April through May or, for most areas, when the soil temperature has reached at least 60 degrees at four inches in depth. An inexpensive thermometer to check the soil temperature can be purchased at the local hardware store.

Dahlias that reach 3 feet tall should be staked. Set the stake before the tuber is planted to avoid the possibility of damaging the tuber or the root system. Stakes need to be 4 - 6 feet tall depending on the variety of the dahlia. Plant the dahlia tubers about 18 – 24 inches apart. Stakes will support the weight of the full-size plant and help support the plant during windy weather. Any staking product will work; metal t-posts, rebar, wooden garden stakes, bamboo stakes, or tomato cages.

Put the tuber in a hole at the recommended 4 – 6 inch depth with the sprout or eye 3 inches from the front of the stake. The eye is the point on the shoulder, or crown of the tuber from which the plant grows. The tuber should be slanted upward with growth bud uppermost. Cover the tuber with only 2 inches of soil after placed in the planting hole, fill in the hole with more soil as the plant grows. Identify each dahlia tuber planted with the variety, size, form, and color written with a super permanent ink marker on a tag tied to the stake.

Do not water at the time of planting. It is advised to wait to water until after the sprouts have appeared above the ground. Good judgement should be used about watering, depending on the weather, in our very dry east of the Cascades climate.

Soil Preparation

Prepare soil about a month before planting. Add organic matter approximately one week before planting. The ground should be warm and well drained at planting. Heavier soil needs to be amended with organic matter such as aged manure, peat moss, leaf mold, or compost to lighten and loosen the soil texture for better drainage. Do not amend the dahlia bed with fresh manure, especially chicken manure, which will burn and damage or even kill plants. Do not amend dahlia beds with purchased top or potting mix soils unless you are sure they have not been treated for weeds or with synthetic fertilizer. This can burn your dahlia sprouts and cause stunted growth. Dahlias thrive in a slightly acidic, sandy loam soil.

Watering

Watering in the dry eastern Cascade climate can be tricky. Only minimal water is indicated until the dahlias sprout. Tubers are prone to rot but do need some moisture in the soil. Young dahlia plants do not need a lot of water; in fact, excessive water can lead to rotting of the plant. After robust growth appears, and temperatures have increased maintain moist, well-drained soil around the roots of dahlias.

Fertilizer

Dahlias require a low nitrogen fertilizer. Look for a fertilizer where the first component number is 1/2 of the other two numbers such as a 5-10-10. Fertilize after sprouting and then every 3 to 4 weeks through mid-August. Do not over fertilize, especially with nitrogen or you will risk small or no blooms, weak tubers, or rot.

Weed Control

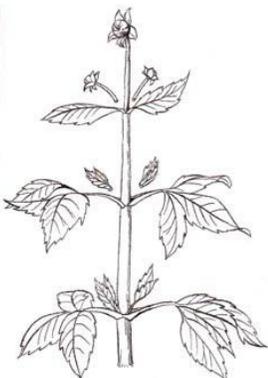
Hand weeding is the only type of weed control you should ever use, there are no exceptions. Do not use any type of herbicides; your dahlias will not survive.

Cutting the Flower

Cut early in the morning or late at night. Fill a metal can or plastic bucket with VERY HOT WATER (approx. 160-180 degrees). Place the freshly cut stems in the can or bucket and allow to cool at least one hour. This will set the blooms and make the flowers last for 4-6 days. Removing old blooms will keep your plants strong and blooming late into the season. Make sure your blooms can easily clear the top of the container to allow the steam to escape without damaging the blooms. Change the water in your containers daily.

Pinching or Topping

To promote bushier plants with better stems for cutting, pinch or cut the center shoot just above the third set of leaves, or at a plant height of about 18-20" tall. Top or pinch the growing tip of all large flowering (4 inch bloom or larger) dahlias after they have developed three to five sets of leaves. This produces more flowers and a compact bush.



Disbudding

Disbudding is the removal of the two side buds next to the central bud at the end of each lateral branch. Removing the two side buds when they are very small (pea sized), will allow the center bud to grow without competition. It will grow a longer and stronger stem. The flower that develops will also be larger because the lateral branch's energy will be diverted into the single flower instead of three flowers.

Pests

Dahlias are susceptible to a host of pests. Regularly monitor your plants for changes. Pest control is not essential and can be reasonably well accomplished

without resorting to chemical pesticides. Watch for earwigs, slugs, spider mites and mildew so control can be started at the earliest stage. Often these problems can be resolved with an organic approach such as dormant oil, neem oil, or spraying the underside of the plant leaves with a stream of water.

Digging Tubers for Storage

East of the Cascades dahlia tubers need to be dug and stored for next spring planting. Or they can be treated as an annual, which requires the purchase of new tubers each year. The digging process should be started after a killing frost; the plants will turn brown if frosted hard enough. Tubers dug too early are still “green” and will not store. Generally, it is safe to dig at the end of October without a frost. Cut the stalk off to about 6” above the ground. Leave tubers in the ground for a week, the tubers will still be growing which will make it easier to see the eyes during the dividing process. Gently lift tubers with a garden fork or spade. Carefully dig around the entire plant about one foot from the stalk. Use care to prevent "broken necks". Wash dirt from the roots, allow them to air dry, and protect from the elements for about 24 hours. The tuber clump should have the label attached.

Dividing

Dividing can be done in the fall, or in the spring, but fall is easier to work with the tubers. If eyes are difficult to see, divide the clump into halves or quarters. The eyes are located near the end where the tuber attaches to the plant stem, the crown. Not all tubers will have an eye. An eye is necessary for next year’s growth. Cut surfaces should be allowed to dry overnight before storing, or planting. Different varieties produce diverse sized and shaped tubers.



Storing Tubers over the Winter Tubers keep best when stored in a dark and cool area between 40-50 degrees. There are numerous methods to store tubers over the winter. Various methods seem to work equally well. Storage must keep the tubers cool (above freezing but ideally below 50 degrees) and allow for an exchange of moisture between the tubers and the storage medium. Below are three methods used by growers east of the Cascades.

- ‘Wood shavings (pet bedding material)/cardboard box method: Start by lining the box with 5 to 6 sheets of newspaper. Lightly spray with water to moisten the paper. Next, add a layer of slightly moistened wood shavings like pet bedding material. Next, add a layer of dahlia tubers. They should NOT be touching each other. Continue layering pet bedding and tubers until box is full, add a layer of moistened newspaper, and fold flaps of the box and place in storage in a dark and cool location. Take care as not to add too much moisture. If too moist the tubers will rot.



- The ‘plastic wrap’ method of storage has been successful for many dahlia growers. Lay a sheet of plastic wrap on your work space. Place one of the labeled tubers on the plastic wrap, roll it to seal it in the first part of the plastic wrap, add another tuber and role it to seal it. Continue the process until all tubers have been wrapped. The American Dahlia Society has detailed information about the plastic wrap dahlia tuber storage method. at <https://dahlia.org/docsinfo/articles/no-fuss-store-your-tubers-in-plastic-wrap/>



- ‘Open Plastic Bag’ tuber storage method. Use the slightly moistened wood shavings/pet bedding medium to create a layering effect with your dahlia tubers. Do NOT seal bag.as too much moisture will accumulate and cause the tubers to rot.

Each storage processes is fairly simple. There are as many storage methods as there are dahlia tuber growers. Experiment with the different storage methods to find the one that works best for you.



References:

- North Central Washington Dahlia Society handout
- Snohomish Dahlia Society handout
- Inland Empire Dahlia Society handout
- Swan Island Dahlias website
- American Dahlia Society website
- WSU Spokane Master Gardener handout

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WSU Extension programs and employment are available to all without discrimination. Evidence of noncompliance may be reported through your local Extensions office.. Persons with disabilities who require alternative means of communication or program information or reasonable accommodations need to contact the Chelan/Douglas Master Gardeners Coordinator at 410 Washington St., Wenatchee, WA or 509-67-6540 at least two weeks prior to an event.