

# Growing Dahlias

**Latin Name Pronunciation:** dah'lee-uh and bloom mid- to late summer and early fall. The genus offers incredible diversity of color and form Dahlias are perennial but not cold hardy – tubers can overwinter in the ground in Zone 8 or warmer (i.e. not in Sea to Sky); in colder climates tubers can be dug up after frost and stored indoors over winter. (See below for helpful how-to tips.)

**Dahlias should be planted outside once the danger of frost has passed and soil temperature has reached approximately 60 F/15 C.** This is usually after your last frost date which is around May 10 in Pemberton. The tubers may be stored in their bags in a cool, dark, dry spot until warmer weather arrives (the bottom of a closet in a cool room or a box in the basement work nicely; do not refrigerate), or they may be pre-potted indoors to start them growing before they are transplanted into the garden.

## Planting

For a single tuber or a tuber clump: Dig a hole about 4" deep and wide enough to accommodate the tuber. Place the tuber in the hole sideways. Back-fill the hole gently, covering the tuber completely with 2-3" inches of soil. To avoid causing rot, do not water the tuber immediately after planting, unless the soil is very dry. Wait until you see the plants sprouting.

Dahlias are at their best when grown in full sun in the North, and afternoon shade in the South. Here in Pemberton B.C. I grow them in silty loam soil amended with organic matter in a sunny location. They even stand up to our blistering winds, but they need some staking for when they get tall, and best to put in place when planting. I like to 'corral' them with 6 T-posts driven into 4' and tie twine in horizontal rows approx. 2 and 3.5 feet from ground.

## Fertilizer/Soil and pH

Soil temperature at planting should be 60°F.

Dahlias prefer well-drained soil with a pH of 6.5 to 7.0.

I only apply a very light balanced organic fertilizer before planting, and they grow just fine. Do not overfeed and avoid high-nitrogen products.

## Watering and monitoring health

Watch for signs of fungal wilt and remove and destroy affected plant parts if it occurs, then sterilize pruners with bleach solution.

Once plants are established, a deep watering twice a week will get them through summer dry periods.

## Weed Management

This is about keeping free of weeds while you wait patiently. Do light hoeing frequently with a small stirrup hoe. No need to get on your knees if you get weeds when they are tiny.

## **Pests/Diseases**

I'm just deleting any recommendations for pest control. If you keep them weeded, apply occasional compost tea ideally, and encourage the birds and beneficial insects then you should be good. I get occasional bug damage, but I just leave unusable blooms on the ground to compost.

Monitor plants for aphids and other insect pests. Its normal to get an insect bloom in August but shortly after the bug pressure starts to slow down.

## **Pruning**

Dahlias make excellent cut flowers; to achieve thinner stems for cutting and bushier, compact plants, pinch out the center shoot just above the third set of leaves in late spring.

## **Harvesting/Dividing (the trickier but rewarding part)**

I used to wait a few days after the foliage is blackened by frost before gently digging out the tubers to store for the winter. But I was always battling fall storms and frozen ground so in 2023 I experimented and successfully cut them down and washed and stored them in early October.

First cut the stalk to 4-6" tall and allow to harden off for a few days. I try to do this on dry days, so stems don't fill with water. Then dig gently with a pitchfork in a circle around the tubers and gently lift them out and brush off excess dirt. Then rinse the soil off the tubers and allow the clump to air dry under cover for 24 hours. Some growers do not rinse clumps which can help prevent drying out.

After harvesting, Dahlia tubers can be stored as a clump or divided and stored individually. If stored as a clump, you may divide them in the spring before planting. The eyes will be more visible, but the tuber will be harder to cut. I find if you let the clumps keep growing over multiple years they start to rot in the middle.

Set up a disinfecting station to dunk your cutting tools in between clumps – this is what the American Dahlia Society recommends a solution of either:

- 10% Solution of Bleach
- Dawn Dish Soap 4 tsp in 5 cups Water
- Virkon S

Note leaving tools in water and bleach can harm them, I'm still working through the research on this one.

If you want the real dirt on dividing check out this resource.

<https://summerdreamsfarm.com/dahlia-tuber-and-splitting-guide#:~:text=Splitting%20a%20Dahlia%20Tuber%20Clump&text=Tuber%20clump%20viewed%20from%20bottom,grew%20from%20the%20prior%20year.>

After you have read the whole enchilada about the parts of a dahlia tuber and how to split them, I can add a few things from my experience:

I use a sharp knife to cut the tubers apart – clumps can really vary but some are really hard to wrestle without going in hard. Try to make sure each tuber or clump you segregate has at least one eye (a dormant bud). Remember only tubers with an eye will grow stems. I can't always see them and sometimes there is guesswork.

Not all tubers will have visible eyes, so cutting a clump into halves or quarters is safer than separating a clump into all individual tubers. You may find a “mother tuber” that is brown and starting to rot, be sure to cut it out. The old stem tends to rot and the little rootlets are not needed so a good clean-up is great as long as you leave enough of the crown- an area approx. the size of a dime.

I found using pine shavings in a Rubbermaid bin with the lid cracked open keeps full clumps well, but even better is to break down your tubers and store in plastic shoe boxes in vermiculite. Floret Flower Farm has a great book “Floret Farms Discovering Dahlias”. There are also a lot of crap video tutorials so use a reliable source.

You just have to jump into surgery to learn how to divide. I have an arsenal of sharp tools – a knife to make the first deep cut to pull the tuber in half, strong sharp clippers to pull stems apart, smaller snips to cut off rootlets or for finer cuts.

I have a lot of tubers, so I go through in mid-august and tie flashing tape around the base with the name of each variety. Note some people wash tubers in fall and some don't. My family would be much happier if I didn't drag them in to washing 500 clumps. (:

Whatever you decide – it's about getting them in a place ideally between 3C- 8 C. (38-45 F). Check that humidity is light and consistent. They'll start shrivelling if dry and rotting if too moist. Your also wise to prevent rodents from eat all your tubers and tags.

If you are storing more than one Dahlia variety, label each tuber. (You can do this by writing with a Sharpie pen directly on the tuber, placing a tag on the tuber, or writing on the packing material or box.)

Keep the boxes in a cool 3C- 8 C. (38-45 F) and dark spot for the winter. Check for rot or shriveling monthly. If shriveling occurs, mist the packing material lightly with water. (Do not directly spray the tubers, and do not over-mist packing material as this can promote mold and fungus growth. Its best to remove any material with mold. Sometimes tubers will survive a light surface mold if it is kept in check. This is the dance if you choose to baby prize plants – I find if they are well buried in vermiculite in a plastic showbox with a lid then you won't have this issue. As springtime nears, some tubers may develop eyes or begin sprouting leaves, others may not. Both are normal.

If you don't want to go through all of this, or circumstances led to the demise of your tubers Haplife will have lots more at great prices in the spring. There are lots of ways to love Dahlias.