



Dahlia Hints and Culture

The Dahlia is native to Mexico and was named after the Swedish botanist, Andreas Dahl.

Location

Dahlias prefer full sun exposure but will perform satisfactorily if given at least one half day of full sun. Any less than one half day of sun will produce plants that are spindly with poor flower production. They will also be prone to powdery mildew.

Soil Preparation

Prepare the soil as deep as possible. Adding compost or other quality soil amendments is very beneficial. If you prefer to fertilize prior to planting, work into the soil about 1/8th of a pound of a balanced granular fertilizer per plant to be grown.

Planting

The biggest problem most gardeners have with Dahlias is tuber rot after planting. The key to avoiding this problem is not to plant into wet, cold soil. April 15th is the earliest that you should consider planting Dahlia tubers in Sonoma County. If spring rains are expected, wait until the soil warms up and dries out.

For all except bedding, mignon or orchid flowering Dahlias, prior to planting, a 1" by 1" by 5' stake should be pounded into the ground. Spacing should be 3' apart except for the smaller types which can be spaced 2' apart.

Dig planting holes 6" to 8" deep. Plant each tuber laying flat with the eye or sprout facing upwards and about 2" from the stake. Cover the tuber with 3" of fine soil. The rest of the soil will be added back into the hole as the tuber grows.

Growing

Allow only one sprout to develop. Break or cut off all other sprouts if they occur. As the sprout grows, gradually fill the hole with the reserved soil, never covering the plant.

Tie the main stalk of the plant to the stake when it is about 2' tall. After that, as side branches develop, use twine or similar material to encircle the growth. Tie loosely around the branches. The idea is just to support the branches from breaking. By the time the plant is fully developed you will most likely have three or four successive ties around the branches. If you don't tie the branches for support, they will break once flowers develop due to the added weight and you will lose that branch for the year and all of the flowers that it would have produced.

Watering

After planting your tubers, if the ground is dry, water once and then don't water again until the plant has produced a shoot above the soil. If there is any moisture in the soil at planting time, do not water. After the plant is growing, water on a regular basis. If you water un-sprouted tubers, they have a very good chance of rotting.

Insects and Rodents

Snails, slugs, earwigs and gophers love Dahlias. Protect your plants as needed against these problems before they occur.

Fertilizing

As your plants grow, a regular supply of a balanced fertilizer is recommended. After the end of August, eliminate nitrogen from your fertilizer program. Excess nitrogen causes poor tuber survival during the winter while they are in storage. A fertilizer such as 0-10-10 is recommended.

Digging and Storing Tubers

By November, your plants should be about finished blooming. Remove any blooms and all buds. There won't be many. It is also a good idea to cut back the plants part way if they are tall in order to reduce the weight on the branches when it rains. Quit watering and let your plants rest. From mid December through January is the time to dig and divide your plants.

Dig clumps carefully as it is quite easy to damage the clump to the point where nothing is salvageable. Use a shovel or fork spade to lift clumps. Begin digging about one foot away from the center of the plant. Lift the entire clump to ground level. Wash off all dirt using a spray nozzle.

Dividing clumps can best be accomplished with a sharp linoleum knife. Not all tubers have eyes. A tuber will not sprout unless it has at least one eye. The eyes are found at the top of the tuber on the ridge where the tuber joins the stem. When a tuber is removed from the clump, the ridge containing the eyes must be attached to the tuber. In some cases, this will require taking a piece of the stem as well.

Clean the tubers of all dirt. Trim the tuber free of roots or excess material. Let the tubers dry in the shade or inside until moisture is gone from the surface of the tubers. This usually takes one to three days, depending on the conditions. Do not set them out in the sun to dry.

Before storing the tubers, they should either be dipped into a liquid fungicide or the cut ends dusted with a fungicide.

There are many different ways to store tubers. Plastic bags or some type of box works well. The container needs to contain enough coarse vermiculite to cover the tubers. Store in a cool, dark location. Tubers should be checked a few times while in storage. Remove any rotten or dried up tubers.

To Dig or Not to Dig

Serious dahlia growers all dig their tubers each year. If left in the ground, they could freeze in a cold winter or rot due to heavy rain. Also, those that survive will throw up multiple shoots the following season. Letting these grow will reduce the quality of the flowers. If left in the ground, you will enjoy flowers much earlier than tubers planted that year but you should remove all but one shoot. If you want to have flowers earlier in the season, dig half of the tubers each year so none are left in the ground for more than two seasons. Mulching over the tubers left in the ground will help loss due to cold weather. Experiment and see what works best for you.

For help with your garden problems, call the Master Gardener hotline at 565-2608 or visit the Master Gardener information desk in the University of California Cooperative Extension office (133 Aviation Blvd., # 109, Santa Rosa), or ask a Master Gardener at your local farmers market or the Sonoma County Fair or other event. See our website at <http://ucanr.edu/sites/scmg/> for additional publications.

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