

Dahlias, with their limitless shapes and colors, add variety and spice to any garden. With plants ranging in height from one to seven feet, and flowers ranging from an inch to a foot, whatever your gardening aesthetic, there is a dahlia for you. Tall blooming dinner plates make a great statement behind shorter blooming perennials while dwarf varieties look lovely in summer container plantings.

### **PLANTING INSTRUCTIONS**

Dahlias thrive in full sun with rich, well-drained soil; however they will tolerate some shade. In the Puget Sound region, the time to plant your tubers is normally April through May. Watch for late frosts and for prolonged cool damp weather. More dahlias are killed by cool, wet springs than by freezing winter temperatures.

For a new dahlia bed we recommend cultivating the soil 8" deep and mixing 2-3" of compost into the soil. Plant tubers about 5-6" deep and space them 3 feet apart for large varieties, 2 feet apart for medium, and 1 foot apart for small ones. Place the tuber horizontal with the eye upward and near the stake. For taller varieties, put support stakes in the ground at planting time in order to secure the typically top-heavy plants.

### **CARE**

Water every two weeks in cooler weather, once to twice a week if it's very hot and when buds begin to form. A thorough, deep soaking is better than frequent light waterings. To have a compact, bushy plant with more flowers, pinch out the center growing tip when the plant is one foot high and deadhead when blooms expire throughout the season. Fertilize when planting, again when 6" tall and while plant is blooming. Since dahlias have many surface roots, only light cultivation is recommended to keep weeds under control. A good weeding early in the season and a blanket of mulch can help reduce weed problems later.

### **PESTS**

Dahlias need protection from slugs and are susceptible to other problems such as aphids, powdery mildew, spider mites and thrips. See a Sky Nursery associate for environmentally friendly controls if you see a problem.

### **LEAVING TUBERS IN THE GROUND**

Tubers will survive cold winter days if kept from freezing. The main risk is poor drainage or a cool damp spring which can lead them to rot. Gardeners who are lucky enough to have good drainage can leave tubers in the ground year round. Dahlias left in the ground usually bloom about 2-3 weeks earlier than tubers that have been lifted and replanted.

If you plan to leave the tubers in place, be sure to trim off the hollow stems so that the ends don't fill up with water and freeze. Cover plants with 2" of mulch.

## DIGGING & STORING

In our wet Pacific Northwest autumn and spring, digging and storing the tubers over the winter is usually highly recommended. Plus every few years clumps of dahlia tubers will eventually become overcrowded and need to be lifted and divided. The best time to do this is after the first frost, typically in late October. You can also dig and divide tubers before transplanting in the spring.

- Carefully lift the tuber clump by digging at least a foot away from the stalk, then slowly pull up on the stalk while using the spade as a lever.
- Clean the dirt off the clump, and trim off the stem and any damaged or weak tubers.
- You can divide tubers now or wait until spring. Each tuber must have one or more “eyes”. The eyes are attached to the main stalk (See diagram below). It may be easier to identify the eyes in the spring when the buds begin to swell.
- Make sure the “neck” connecting the bulb area to the eye is strong. Discard any tubers with broken necks or without an eye.
- To prevent fungal disease, dust the tubers with sulfur.
- Store in a dark, cool (40-45° F) place. Protect from freezing. Most growers store tubers in perforated plastic bags, half-filled with damp vermiculite to prevent shriveling. Don't forget to mark or label the tubers for easy identification.
- Check the roots during the winter and discard any that show rot.

