



How to Grow Dahlias in the Garden

Preparing the soil:

Dahlias like well aerated soil that has a lot of humus and drains well. Organic matter will loosen clay soil and sand will improve drainage.

Planting:

The best time to plant outside on the West Coast and Vancouver Island is from late April to the end of May. Ground temperature should be about 15C. Tubers won't grow in cold, wet soil. They need well drained soil and 6 - 8 hours of sunlight.

Dig a hole about 13 cm (5 inches) deep. If your garden tends to be windy, drive a stake into the ground beside the hole. Stakes can be bamboo, wood, plastic coated steel or rebar. Tomato cages are an alternative for small varieties. Lay the tuber horizontally in the hole with the eye (like a potato sprout) closest to the stake and facing up. Cover lightly with soil. Plant small and Pompoms at least 60 cm (2 feet) apart, medium and giant sizes a meter (approx. 3 feet) apart.

You can start tubers inside or in a greenhouse. Put them in pots with slightly moist potting soil in a sunny (but not hot) location, water very lightly then plant outside when they're actively growing and the ground is warm enough.

Watering:

Start watering when the plant is about 20 cm (8") high, not before, unless the leaves are drooping. Drooping leaves mean they need water. Soak the soil once or twice a week, more frequently if it's hot and preferably in the morning. Water the soil, not the leaves.

Tying:

If you're using a stake, tie the stalk loosely to it starting when the plant is about 30 to 45 cm (12 to 18 inches) tall and continue about every 30 to 45 cm. Tie loosely to be sure not to damage the stalk. If you drive stakes in after planting, allow plenty of space to avoid damaging the tubers.

Topping or Pinching:

Pinch out the centre shoot above the 3rd or 4th pair of leaves to promote sturdier, bushier plants with larger blooms and better stems.

Disbudding:

Disbudding is another way to achieve bigger blooms and longer stems. Dahlias send out three buds at the flowering terminal, a centre bud and two side buds. Removing the two side buds when they're small will let the centre bud grow stronger and larger.

Digging, Dividing and Storing:

Dig within 2 weeks of a hard frost and by mid-November if there hasn't been a frost. Tubers dug too early won't keep well. Cut the stalks to about 15 cm (6 inches) a week or two before you plan to dig. This will help eyes to develop. Dig carefully to avoid breaking crowns, brush off excess soil, wash the clumps and allow them to air dry for about 24 hours. Never dry them on a lawn, in the garden or on a concrete floor.

You can divide in fall or spring. There should be an eye on each tuber's crown, eyes can be so tiny you can't see them, and occasionally a tuber might not have an eye. Remove the whole stalk and the mother tuber, which will be directly at the base of the stalk and will be woodier than the other tubers. When dividing, each division must have a piece of the crown with an eye. You can divide into individual tubers, each with an eye, or into clumps of a few tubers with one or more eyes.

Sterilize cutting tools with Lysol after each clump and sprinkle cinnamon on the cuts.

Tubers are ready to store when they're dry. There are **many** ways to store them, e.g. in wood, cardboard or Styrofoam boxes with vermiculite and/or dry wood shavings, and some growers recommend storing so they don't

touch each other to minimize the risk of rot spreading. Some growers wrap tubers in cling wrap or store in other ways. Store below 10C in an insulated shed or garage, not on a concrete floor, and don't let them freeze.

Tubers can stay in the ground over winter if the soil drains well. It's a good idea to dig them after the second year to encourage better blooms and to avoid overcrowding.

In winter:

Check stored tubers about once a month. Discard any that have rotted, and sprinkle cinnamon on the cuts. If tubers have shrivelled, spray them lightly with water, but don't soak them.

Move tubers to room temperature in February or March to "wake them up" and to encourage eyes to develop.