



How to Grow Dahlias in Containers

Containers can be terracotta, wood, synthetic, polyethylene, galvanized or other materials. Whatever they're made of, they need one or more drainage holes. Use a large container, 3 - 5 gallons for small plants, approximately 7 gallons for A and B sizes and larger for AA. Putting a few small, light plant pots upside down or Styrofoam blocks in the bottom of large containers will reduce the weight.

Use potting mix and up to 25% compost. Adding a small amount of vermiculite or perlite will make it lighter and improve drainage. You can use up to 50% garden soil but 100% garden soil doesn't work well because it compacts and doesn't hold water.

Plant when you would plant in the ground, that is, from late April to the end of May on the West Coast and Vancouver Island, when ground temperature is 15C or above.

Mix a small quantity of fertilizer into the soil. 5-10-10 (or 8-24-24 granular if it's available) provide phosphorus to help develop roots and flowers and potassium to enhance overall growth, help regulate root & top growth and help plants stay healthy and balanced.

Drive a stake into the soil so you can tie the stalk to it to stabilize the plant. This is especially important in windy locations. Stakes can be bamboo, wood, plastic coated steel or rebar, and it's best to put them in before planting to avoid damaging the tuber. Tomato cages are an alternative to stakes.

Dig a hole approximately 13 cm (5 inches) deep and 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.

Put containers on a stand, bricks or other base to make sure they can drain and to avoid damaging a patio floor. They need 4 – 8 hours of sun.

Containers dry out quickly in summer so need to be watered frequently, usually daily. Water the roots, not the foliage. The potting mix will settle and the tuber might become exposed. If this happens you can add more potting mix.

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 container 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.