



Growing Dahlias

Dahlias are easy to grow and add flowers in a dizzying array of colors, sizes, and shapes to the garden. Open center varieties also feed pollinators. The ideal garden dahlia blooms early, maintains its vigor throughout the growing season, and provides flower and foliage colors from summer to frost.

Origin

Dahlias originated from Mexico. They belong to the Asteraceae family and are close relatives of Cosmos and Bidens. Botanists have identified 42 species.

Flowers

Aster family plants have "daisy" type flowers. What seems to be a single flower is a composite of several small flowers. The "petals" are individual strap-shaped flowers called ray flowers, and the center disk is made up of radially symmetric, individual disc flowers.

The size of flowers determine how soon the plant begins to bloom. From planting, small flowering plants take 75 days, medium flowering ones take 90 days, and large flowering ones take 120 days. Prune young plants to encourage branching and remove spent flowers both encourage more flowers.

How to Start

Potted Dahlias are increasingly available from garden centers. If you buy a potted Dahlia, dig a hole about the size of the container and transfer the tuber and potting mix into the hole. The tuber should be four- to six-inches below soil level.

If you want a particular variety, specialty growers or local Dahlia Society will likely have a tuber of your chosen cultivar. Healthy tubers should feel firm and appear plump. There should be no mold or diseased areas. It should not appear shriveled. Look for one or more "eye", similar to the eyes on potato tubers.

Planting

Planting time is determined by soil temperature (near 60 °F). This may be March for the southern part of the US, late April for the Pacific Northwest, and May for northern US. If tubers are planted too early, they may rot in cold, soggy soil.

Dahlias thrive in full sun (6+ hours) and well-draining soil with neutral to slightly acidic pH. Sandy loam soil is ideal. If your soil is heavy with clay, amend it with organic material, such as compost. You may also grow them in containers.

In the spring when the ground has warmed and there is little chance of frost, plant tubers into the ground. Dig a hole 4- to 6-inches deep and place the tuber flat on top of the soil, with eyes facing up, then fill the hole. If the tuber has sprouted already, shorten the sprout to 1-inch before planting.

Most dahlias benefit from a support structure. Place your stake or cage at planting; inserting them later risks injuring the tuber.

If you want flowers sooner, start the tuber indoors about four to six weeks before planting them out. Use a potting mix and put containers under grow light to encourage strong stems. Transplant into the garden when the soil has warmed.

Cultural Tips

Watering: At planting, moisture from soil is sufficient for tubers. If your soil is bone dry, moisten with a spray bottle. Once growth begins, giving it a slow soak. Water needs to reach the root zone, which is likely eight to ten inches deep. At the end of a watering session, check for moisture penetration. The tuber should not dry out nor sit in soggy soil; set your watering schedule accordingly.

Fertilizing: Conduct a soil test before choosing a product. In general, use a low nitrogen fertilizer, such as 5-10-10 ratio, every 4 weeks through August. Container plants should be fed every 2-3 weeks.

Pinching: When the plant is around 12 inches tall, remove the top shoot. This encourages a bushy plant and more flowers.

Pests: Slugs and snails can damage young stems. Bait after sprouts appear and keep up baiting when the plant is small. Other common pests include thrips, leaf miners, spider mites, and earwigs. Monitor closely and address the problem by removing with water jets, hand picking, or pruning off infected parts. Use chemicals only as a last resort.

Diseases: Dahlia diseases can be fungal, bacterial, or viral. See OSU Publication below for details.

Dividing: Tubers should be divided every 2-3 years in the spring or fall. An overcrowded tuber clump is likely to grow many stems, some of which are weak, and make the plant difficult to manage.

Fall & Winter Care

Tubers left in the ground may be damaged during the winter if soil freezes or becomes too wet. In USDA Zone 8 or above, dahlia tubers can overwinter underground. Keep them dry and warm by removing the top after a killing frost, covering the root zone with something, such as 6 ml plastic sheet, to keep it dry, then piling leaves, straw, or compost on top to keep the root zone warm.

Gardeners living in USDA Zone 7 or below should dig up tubers after a killing frost. Wash off soil, dry thoroughly, surround tubers in a medium such as wood shaving, saw dust, or vermiculite, for storage at about 40 °F. Check periodically for rot and moisten storage medium as needed.

Resources

Dahlias in Oregon, Oregon State University Extension Publication FS95

<https://extension.oregonstate.edu/catalog/fs-95-dahlias-oregon>

Dahlia Mosaic Virus, Washington State University

<https://s3.wp.wsu.edu/uploads/sites/2193/2017/08/Binder11.pdf>

American Dahlia Society, <https://www.dahlia.org/>

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