

Growing Beautiful Dahlias Year After Year

Credit to Helen Halpenny (edited and photos by Linda Bartlett)

Dahlias, those diverse brightly coloured blooms grown from tubers, are making a huge comeback in the plant world. There are varieties barely 30 cm (12") tall and others that tower to two meters (7 feet). The blossom colours range from white to yellow, orange, red, pink to purple and all sorts of combinations. The foliage, too, may be green, bronze or almost chocolate brown. Some dahlias have blooms the size of dinner plates, and some are round as baseballs. Well-grown plants will reward the grower with blooms from mid-summer until frost. Full sun and soil that is well-draining and rich are necessary.



Dahlia Colorado Classic is a floriferous variety



Dahlia Linda's Baby has stunning ball-shaped blooms

Dahlias are considered tender perennials which means that they can return each year as long as they aren't exposed to frost. Therefore, we grow new plants from tubers that have been stored in a frost-free area over winter. Chunks of stored tubers are planted in spring when the soil temperature gets above 13°C (55°F). The tubers must contain an "eye" to produce a plant, and they are planted in a hole about 15 cm (6") deep. Taller growing plants will need to be staked, which is easiest to do at planting time. Low bushy varieties will benefit from pinching out the growing tips of the stems when they are about 45 cm (18") tall to make the plant grow stout and floriferous. A continuous supply of water is a must. Some dahlias can be grown from seed, and most can be grown from cuttings.

Dahlias will reward you with continuous colour in the garden, and they are also prized as cut flowers. It is best to cut dahlias when in full bloom. When picked, prick a hole using a straight pin into the neck of the stem to prevent air blockage. Place stems in three or four inches of hot water and let water cool for a couple of hours before arranging them in a vase. The blooms should last for a week. To get larger blooms, disbud the side buds on a stem leaving just one bud. This will receive all the nutrients and result in a larger blossom.



Dahlia Daisy Duke is a decorative dahlia which blooms early and keeps going late into the Fall.



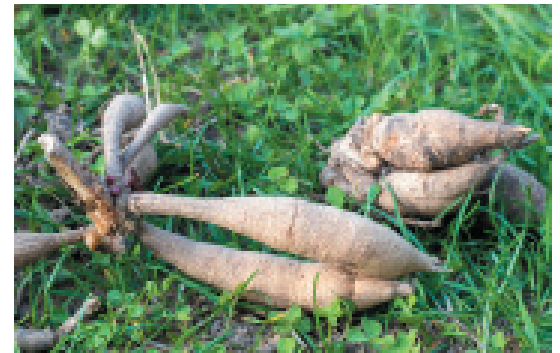
A cluster of tubers dug up from one plant after a killing frost.

After a killing frost has blackened the foliage in fall, cut the stalks to about four inches and carefully dig the tuber for minimum damage. The original tuber you planted in the spring will have grown into a cluster of tubers. Let the bunches dry for a day or two (soil can be washed off gently before drying). Check the tubers for insect or disease damage and rot. Discard any that are damaged. To label each tuber, use a black marker and write on the tuber. Then store the tubers in peat moss, dry leaves or vermiculite in a box or bag in a cool basement over winter. The medium should be barely damp. If the tubers get too moist, they will rot. If they are too dry, they will shrivel and die.

In spring, the tubers can be divided by carefully cutting apart the cluster, making sure that every section includes at least one “eye.” These are buds from which new growth will sprout. They look like little pink points. Expect to have five or more plants for every tuber started the previous spring.

Dahlia fanciers, namely the American Dahlia Society, have named each form of flower. These include Anemone, Ball, Collarette, Formal Decorative, Incurved Cactus, Informal Decorative, Laciniated, Miniature Ball, Mignon Single, Novelty Open, Novelty Fully Double, Orchid, Peony, Pompon, Semi Cactus, Single, Stellar, Straight Cactus, and Waterlily.

As an added note, there is a new form being evaluated called “Micro” which will be up to 2” in diameter, and will more than likely be added to the list within the next year or so. All gardeners can enjoy growing these easy and rewarding flowers. The hardest decision is which kind and colour to choose.



Dahlia tubers on the ground, sprouting. Eye of a dahlia tuber with a shoot - ready for spring planting.