

Dahlia tubers

The dahlia originated from Mexico however you'd hardly be able to tell as it flourishes extremely well in our climate, no matter what the weather throws at it. That being said, the more attention you pay to it, the bigger and brighter it will shine for you.

Dahlias make excellent garden plants, a mixed border or collection of pots containing these bold blooms will 100% result in a comment or 2 from a jealous neighbour. Dahlias are also a renowned and much-loved cut flower, here at Scottish Cut Flowers we would be bereft without them!

The following information is a great start to get your dahlia obsession kick started, but for more information, I would suggest popping onto YouTube for some video tutorials. *Garden time TV* has a huge selection of dahlia specific videos or you can just type in your exact query (i.e. dahlia plant supports) and you will find a wealth of different options and inspiration.

So without further ado...

Pre-sprouting

It is best to get your tubers growing quickly once they arrive, as they have a winter dormancy you will need to break and extended storage could cause a deterioration in the tubers condition. But the best reason is that the sooner you start them off the sooner you get to enjoy their beautiful blooms.

Therefore, it is best to start them growing inside while you wait for the weather outside to warm up.

When you receive your tubers:

- bury them into individual pots of moist (but not wet) compost and label them. The Tubers neck should be level with the soil or just below.
- put the pots in a frost-free warm and sunny position such as a heated greenhouse (a heat mat at night would do) or sunny windowsill.
- don't water until you see active growth, the reason for this is that you don't want the tubers to sit in wet soil and rot before they kick into life.

Propagation from cuttings

If you wish to increase your stock of a particular variety then dahlia cuttings are a great way to do this at the start of the season. If you are interested to learn more check out a video on YouTube by *Pepperharrow farm - taking dahlia cuttings*

Preparing the ground

Dahlias will grow well in most soils, but why not give them exactly what they want so that they reward you with extra beauty. Rich and well drained soils in a sunny spot will allow dahlias to grow to their full potential.

- Work the soil where each tuber is to be planted to at least 30cm deep. More if you can be bothered.
- Add a generous amount of compost and mix in a handful or 2 of organic fertilizer.
- This step can be done a couple of weeks before the tubers are ready to go outside to allow the fertilizer time to incorporate.

Planting out

Planting your tubers outside should be held off until all risk of frost has passed, to be super safe let's say May-June. If you want to plant them out earlier just be sure to provide some protection from overnight frosts such as a thick mulch or frost cloth.

- The potted tubers should be well watered before planting to reduce shock.
- Dig a hole slightly larger than the potted tuber.
- If you have not already fertilized the soil you'd best add some into the bottom of the planting hole now.
- Place the potted tuber into the hole so that it sits just below the soil surface. When you back fill the soil around the plant it should have created a slight depression or dip. The thinking behind this is that when you water it will sink down directly to the tuber and not run away to the sides (remember Dahlias are thirsty!).

Pest protection

Dahlias must be delicious because everything wants to eat them apart from us (little known fact they were originally imported as a food crop!). It is important to protect the plants especially when they are small. Regular feeding and watering will actually go a very long way in promoting the plants own defense mechanisms, but here are some tips for controlling the worst offenders:

- Slugs: I use an organic slug pellet called Sluggo. There are many other options including homemade traps, copper tape, wool pellets, egg shells. Whatever you fancy.
- Aphids: I encourage beneficial insects such as lady birds, lace wings and parasitic wasps to feed on aphids so I don't use sprays on my crops. Beneficial insects naturally build up over time or you can fast track the process by mail ordering them. There are many spray options for controlling these juicy bellied blighters. Just be mindful of the effect these chemicals will have on the good guys.
- Earwigs (clip-shears): These guys will chew holes in flower buds so they are enemy number 1 around here. There are various methods to catch them. My preferred is to push a cane into the ground close to each plant then stuff a pot with straw or newspaper, push this onto the top of the cane upside down. Each morning gentle pull the pots of the canes and dump the contents in to a bucket. The sleeping earwig is now at your mercy! I prefer the foot stomp and twist method of disposal.

Growing in pots

No reason why dahlias can't be successfully grown in pots, you will just need to follow a few rules of thumb.

- Bigger pot = better plant. Your one tuber will multiply up into 7-20 over 1 season! So the pot needs to be big enough to accommodate that with extra room for compost to provide a water source and food.
- Dahlias are top heavy, this needs to be addressed both at planting time and once they are actively growing.
 - o 1st step add heavy "stuff" to the bottom of the pot before adding compost. This could be smashed up bricks, concrete or logs, any hefty old rubbish will do.
 - o 2nd step to find a spot to put the pot which is out of direct wind gusts, but also has full sun! Where you'd choose to sunbathe on a summer day in Scotland essentially!
 - o 3rd step is to provide a lot of support once the stems start shooting up. This could be a shop bought support for pots or you can MacGyver one up with bamboo canes and twine to make an enclosure around the plant. It really doesn't matter what it looks like, the plant will quickly disguise it.
 - o Pest protection, pinching, harvest, etc. are all the same as dahlias in the ground.
- More water = healthier plant. Dahlias in pots don't have the option to put down roots in the soil to find their own water supply. You are now their lifeline so make sure to water them deeply at least twice a week. Without water plants will have stunted growth and become stressed. A stress plant is far more likely to succumb to pest and disease problems.

- They are extra hungry in pots – Once the base fertilizer in the compost runs out the dahlia will be looking to you again for food. You can add slow release fertilizer to the compost when you plant the dahlia to help out. But a regular liquid feed, such as seaweed or homemade nettle/comfrey solutions, will really get you in the dahlia's good books!

Mulch

Mulch is a great tool for keeping weeds in check, retaining moisture in the soil and making your garden look like the bee's knees.

You can use a variety of materials as a mulch including straw, sterile compost, leaf mould. These have the added benefit of decomposing over the season which means that you are also increasing the organic matter in the soil, thereby improving it for next seasons dahlias. Alternatively, you can use weed suppression fabrics.

- Put down a 2" thick layer of your chosen mulch around the base of each plant, or ideally the whole growing bed.
- That's actually it! Easy peasy.

Watering

Even in Scotland these plants can do with extra watering (I honestly don't know how they survived in Mexico!)

Basic plant biology lesson in session: Water is used to fill plant cells so they can elongate. In simple terms the more water available to a plant the longer & thicker stems will be followed by bigger flowers.

- Once a week give your dahlias a deep soak, at least half a watering can each. Don't sprinkle – SOAK!

Pinching

This can be a tricky step for anyone new to gardening but it is essential if you want to develop a healthy plant. Again this is a technique best watched (get onto YouTube) but essentially you are cutting off the top of each stem produced by the tuber once they reach about a foot tall. This both encourages long side shoots to form and it also stops the original stem from growing into a massive hollow tree trunk beast which is top-heavy and prone to wind damage. It also results in many more flowers, so it is a win/win.

Supporting

There are various ways to support dahlias:

- For showing: each flowering stem is tied onto a cane (showing is a whole other world which I know every little about... so this is the last time I will mention it!)
- For individual dahlia plants: These usually produce 3-7 stems so you want to stop them from spilling apart. Insert 3 thick bamboo or thin wooden stakes around the plant in a triangle shape. Tie garden twine to 1 of the supports about a foot of the ground and start to tightly loop the twine around all of the supports so that you create a boundary for any shoots growing up to keep within. 3 layers of twine (low, middle and at the top of the supports) will keep the plants contained whilst they grow older.
- For Cut Flowers: We grow our dahlias in rows so choose to support the whole row of plants together rather than individually. The technique is essentially the same as above but this time the supports are placed around the perimeter of the bed and the twine not only runs around the boundary but also criss crosses the bed to prevent stems from collapsing sideways. This method is called Corraling if you wish to research it further.

Deadheading

To enjoy a continual show of flowers through the season you must, must, must deadhead the plants. This means that as soon as a flower starts to look a bit “Meh” cut the flower off. Leaving old flowers on the plant will allow it to move into seed production and the plant thinks it has fulfilled its destiny by producing the next generation. You want to keep your plants broody and putting on its most alluring outfit!

Cut flowers

Dahlia flowers don't open much further once they have been cut so it is important to know for the right stage.

- The time to cut a dahlia flower is when the petals have reflexed back enough so that they are horizontal on each side of the stem, but don't wait so long that the flower is fully open and the petals on the back side have started to look dehydrated. It's not as complicated as it sounds once you've had some practice.
- Comb through your dahlias every 3 days to ensure you catch every possible flower to bring indoors.
- Make sure you take a long stem with it, at least 30-40cm. This gives you something useful to arrange with and also means that the plant will be stimulated to produce 2 new long stems from low down in the plant. Believe me, with all the food and drink your giving this plant, it has more than enough energy to pump out new long and strong growth all season long.
- Strip the foliage off from the bottom 2/3 of the cut flower stem and place immediately into a bucket of deep, cool water.
- Ideally you'd leave the flowers in this bucket somewhere cool for a couple of hours to condition before arranging them.
- Dahlias usually have a vase life of 5+ days if cut at the right stage however the dinner plate varieties will likely be shorter (beauty is a curse!)

Lifting Vs Over-wintering in the ground

Once the first hard frost blackens all the dahlia foliage (usually late Sept – Oct) it is time to prepare your plants for winter.

Traditionally in Britain we have always lifted dahlias to protect them from the winter cold (remember they are from Mexico). However, our winters are warmer and wetter now so with a good deal of protection and a tendency to gamble – you might get away with leaving them in the ground. I left a row in the ground 2 years ago with the method outlined below and they nearly all survived and came back bigger and stronger plants.

- Overwinter in Ground: The cold is bad but the wet is worse! Lay a really thick layer of mulch or each plant, I used about 4 layers of frost cloth, but a thick layer of natural materials such as leaves or straw would work too. Top this with a waterproof material, such as tarp, so that rain is shed away from the tubers and doesn't lead to rotting. Weigh all this down really well to stop the wind from whipping it away.
- Lifting to store. If you want to build up your quantity of dahlias, then lifting is the best option as this allows you to divide the tubers.
 - o Cut the foliage down to about a foot (you need this as a handle)
 - o Push a fork into the ground a little bit away from the tuber clump and gently lift it out of the ground, holding onto the main stem.
 - o Push excess mud off the clump with your fingers but be very gentle, you don't want to shake or bang the clump as this will damage the plant and your potential new plants.
 - o Make sure to keep the name tag if you want to remember which dahlia is which (tubers from every variety just look like tatties to me!) a good tip is to use an elastic band to tie the tag to the stem.
 - o Let the clumps dry in the sun, or more likely in Britain, somewhere they can't get rained on!

Dividing

I keep repeating myself, but you know that time-old saying a YouTube video tutorial is worth 1,000,000,000 words, right!?

This is something you need to see to replicate but the basis behind it is to multiple your stock. Plants for free are the best kind!

You can choose when you want to divide your tubers, this can either be done directly after lifting them or you can store them overwinter (instructions below) and then divide them in the Spring.

Even if you don't want any more of that variety I would still encourage you to divide your clumps at least every 3 year to keep them a manageable size and flowering to their maximum potential. Gift your excess to someone else.

Storage

Once you've had 1 season of trying to store dahlia tubers over winter then you get access to a secret club called "How did YOU store your tubers last winter" There is only one topic of conversation because there does not seem to be a right or wrong answer. It simply comes down to what space you have available and therefore choosing the right method for you!

I'm a swine and have access to a Victorian root vegetable store room! That is not the norm I'm led to believe from other members of the secret club!

However, it is important to give storage a good deal of thought. These are expensive plants and too beautiful to lose. I would suggest Googling/YouTubing around the topic to find a method which seems to fit your available space. But here are my basic tips:

- The space must be dark, such as a cellar. Alternatively, you will need to make it artificially dark by covering the container you use to store them.
- The space must be very cool (2-3 degree Celsius) but completely frost free. Some people find their garages or sheds to be a good storage place but if yours is prone to icing up on the inside then you will need to provide some insulation.
- Check on your dahlias regularly and remove any rotten tubers to prevent disease from spreading.
- If you are storing individual tubers (which you divided after lifting) then a good option is layering into storage boxes with vermiculite or old (very slightly) moist potting compost so that the tubers are not touching.