

DAHLIA GROWING BASICS

CENTRAL COAST DAHLIA SOCIETY

Dahlias are a very diverse flower, originating in Mexico. Over the past 200 years they have been hybridized into 1,000's of varieties. Flowers grow from tubers and come in a huge range of color and form. Plant height can vary from 1 foot to well over 6 feet tall and flowers can range from the size of a quarter to the size of a dinner plate. The American Dahlia Society (ADS) has classified dahlias in their handbook according to name, size (micro to giant), form (19 different forms), and color (solids, light and dark blends, variegated, and bi-colors) There are many opinions, ideas, and practices for growing dahlias successfully. Here are some of the basics.

SITE SELECTION: Dahlia tubers like well-drained soil and a sunny location (about 8 hours of sun). Avoid windy locations. Dahlias can be grown successfully in warmer climates. If you live in North County or inland, plant your dahlias in a place that will give them some afternoon shade, so as to avoid the extreme heat of the day. Dahlias grow quite well in pots. Do use a good quality potting soil!

SOIL PREPARATION: The key to any garden is good soil! Dahlias need well drained soil. If you have clay soil it will be important to work in a lot of organic material and compost to help with drainage. Sandy soil needs compost and amendments as well to help improve water holding capacity.

PLANTING: In the Spring, it is time to plant your purchased tubers. Look for firm large tubers with a visible sprout at the head. Tubers will begin to sprout from one or more eyes. Some varieties sprout quickly, others can take several weeks. Plant tubers after danger of frost has past and the soil has warmed. Dig a hole and incorporate a balanced time release fertilizer 10-10-10, 4-4-4. Plant horizontally only about 1 or 2 inches deep, with the eye facing up. You can add soil as the dahlia sprout grows. Stake your dahlia at this time, so that your dahlia has support as it grows (tall pieces of rebar work well). Tomato cages work well too. Be careful when placing the stake to not damage the tuber.

WATERING: Do not water tubers at planting time unless the tubers are dry (shriveled) , and the soil is obviously lacking moisture. Tubers need a chance to form roots that can absorb water. Watering too early will increase the chance of rotting tubers. Under normal Spring moisture conditions, watering can be delayed until sprouts appear above the ground. After plants are established, a deep watering; 20 minutes, twice a week, is necessary, maybe three times a week during very warm, dry weather. Do not overhead water your dahlias, as this can cause mildew and disease. Focus water at the roots. Drip systems do an excellent job! As fall approaches, water can be cut back to once a week, and then stopped.

FERTILIZING: An old school of thought was the idea that low nitrogen fertilizing for dahlias was best, however it is now felt that nitrogen is very important to the initial growing stages of your dahlias. Nitrogen is the first number listed on any package of fertilizer. Dahlias are heavy feeders, especially if grown in a pot! Dahlias love fish emulsion! During the first couple of months feed your dahlias fish emulsion. Foliar feeding with seaweed extract or compost tea is also beneficial. When you see the first flower buds form, use a balanced liquid fertilizer. Remember to apply at the roots (unless its a foliar spray), so as not to burn your dahlia leaves. Apply in the morning or early evening, not the heat of the day.

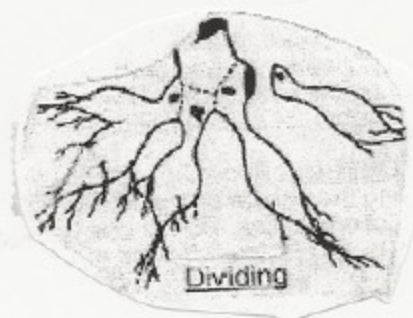
PESTS AND DISEASES: slugs and snails LOVE dahlias! Control with bait sprinkled at the base and also into the canopy of your dahlia plant. Sluggo works really well, and is not harmful to your pets. Earwigs can eat leaves and flowers. Prevention helps! Keep areas around dahlias free of debris and weeds. Look for them hiding under rocks, pavers, and pots. Sluggo Plus works great on earwigs as well as snails and slugs. Whiteflies, thrips, leaf minors, mites, and aphids can all attack our dahlias. A good, consistent spraying program helps. Powdery mildew can become a problem later in the season, especially when we experience a lot of fog and cloud cover in our area. Keep plants well watered and fed. Horticulture oil (such as Monterey horticulture oil) mixed with spinosad (Captain Jack's Dead Bug) in a sprayer works very well. Cucumber beetles, appear as green ladybugs. They are NOT beneficial insects and will chew up your flowers. Hand picking in the early morning is the best way to control them.

TOPPING AND DISBUDDING: To obtain more blooms from your dahlia plants, one MUST "top it". When the plant has 3 to 5 sets/pairs of leaves, you should pinch out the center of emerging leaves. Each set of remaining leaves will generate two lateral branches. Pinching creates more blooms and a sturdier plant. When blooms begin to show, you will notice two buds on the sides of the center bloom. These "side buds" should be removed to encourage a large, healthy, and vigorous flower



DIGGING: Dig dahlias about 2 weeks after a hard frost. Typically, around the central coast, this can be done in November or December. Plants will turn brown when frosted hard enough. This allows time for the tubers to "cure" under the ground before you dig. Cured dahlia tubers shrivel less in storage. If your area has not had a hard frost by mid November, it will be safe to dig because the cool nights slow down plant growth and tubers will "cure". Cut the stalk off to about 6 inches, carefully insert a clamping or wide tined pitch fork about a foot away from the stalk, so as not to damage the tuber clump, and gently lift the tuber clump out of the soil. Wash all soil from the roots with a garden hose. Be careful not to break tuber necks while lifting and washing

DIVIDING: Opinions differ on dividing and storing. Some gardeners like to store the whole root clump and others divide them in the spring. Some wait until spring to dig and divide and then just put a chunk of the tuber back into the soil. Most commercial growers, prefer to divide roots soon after digging, and then do the entire process of final cleaning, treating for fungus, and marking before storing. In dividing clumps, **EACH DIVISION MUST HAVE A PIECE OF THE CROWN WITH AN EYE.** Remove all of the stem; any remaining tends to promote crown rot and could ruin the tuber. Remove all small feeder roots and divide leaving visible sprouts/ eyes for each tuber. If this is not accomplished you will not have a dahlia for next year! After cutting the divisions, soak for 5 minutes in a 5% bleach solution. Remove tubers and let dry. Once dry, the tuber can have its name written on it with an indelible pencil or a sharpie.



STORAGE: Gardeners differ on how to store tubers over the winter. One needs to devise a method that will keep tubers cool, but also keep them from freezing and allow them an exchange of moisture between tubers and the storage medium. Along the Central Coast, we are not in danger of losing our tubers to freezing temperatures and dahlias CAN survive in the ground in our climate over the Winter. If you choose to store them, the container must have some slight moisture in the storage medium; otherwise the tubers will shrivel. Tightly closed containers tend to hold too much moisture, and will cause rot. Many growers use coarse vermiculite in plastic bags to store tubers that have dried a few days. One can also place tubers in a storage container with peat moss or vermiculite. Regardless of the method, it is important to periodically check the condition of the tubers. Throw out rotting tubers to prevent the spread of rot. In early spring bring your boxes out of their cool storage area and into a warmer place, such as a bedroom in you home. This will encourage sprouting of new eyes and begins a new planting season!

NOTE: Central Coast Dahlia Society is a local participating society of the the American Dahlia Society. We meet the third Tuesday of every month. www.centralcoastdahlias.org