

PLANTING



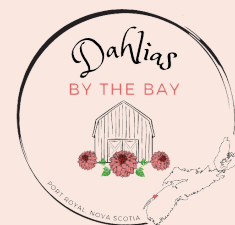
12 Months of Dahlia Care

GROWING



Dahlias are relatively easy to grow but have additional care requirements beyond other summer flowers. This guide will help you get started on your Dahlia growing journey going beyond just the growing season.

TUBER CARE AND STORAGE



The Abundance of Dahlias

Dahlias come in so many different colours with an abundance of interesting textures and shapes from formal to whimsical. You will find many varieties that suit your tastes whether you are looking to fill a cutting garden, add character and interest to a display garden, or if you want to grow for a special event.

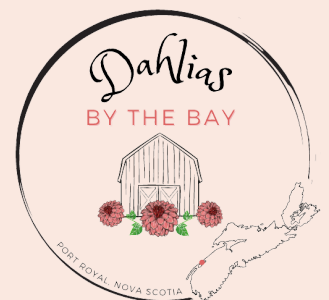


Using This Guide

This guide covers monthly tasks starting with planning and prepping your garden. You will also learn how to plant, grow, divide and store your dahlia tubers. Included is a section on how to cut and care for your flowers so you can enjoy their longest vase life. You may need to adjust your specific schedule depending on your growing zone.

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Planning Your Garden

Winter is the time of year for dreaming. It is time to plan out your garden beds, how many dahlias you intend to grow, and where to source them. I suggest purchasing tubers from reputable small growers instead of big box stores because you are more likely to get quality tubers free of disease AND you are supporting family-owned businesses.



If you have tubers already in storage make sure you are checking them often for signs of rot or drying out. I will go over more information about storage in November. Now is a good time to look for replacement tubers if you have lost any during storage over the winter.

Tuber pre-sales start happening as early as November and go through March. When ordering tubers online keep in mind that you won't start getting your shipments until Spring depending on what zone you're in. (This reduces the chance of your tubers freezing in the mail) *Pro Tip: Start a list of varieties you order so you don't duplicate your purchases.

January Tip

When planning out your garden keep in mind you want to space your tubers 45-60 cm(18-24 inches) apart.

Remember to plan your paths wide enough to walk down when your dahlias are in full bloom. Dahlias are heavy drinkers also, so have a water source close by.

Garden Maintenance

Depending on where you live you may be able to get out in your garden and start cleaning it up. However, that may need to wait until your snow melts and you can see your ground again. The struggle is real!



Check on your tubers in storage again (if you have them stored from last season).

If you are like me and have a foot of snow on the ground preventing you from getting in your garden you can always spend some time in your garage or outbuilding doing tool maintenance. Sharpening your pruning shears, garden scissors, and checking on your rototiller if you have one. Order replacement tools and equipment at this time.

Are you planning on planting other flowers or bulbs this year? It is time to order those seeds and get everything ready to start sowing indoors (if you have the set up for it).

February Tip

Start making a list of fertilizers you will need for the season, stakes for tying up dahlias, garden twine, gloves, new plant labels, etc. Order early so you have them on hand and ready when it is time to plant.

Garden Preparation

When choosing a garden location remember that your dahlias need at least 6-7 hours of direct sunlight and prefer a slightly acidic soil around 6.5. Getting a complete soil test is essential to knowing what amendments you will need. In future years it is beneficial to add amendments in the fall, but they can be added in the spring before planting.



Get as much organic matter into your beds as possible and consider raised beds if your soil is clay. Make sure your soil is well-draining. Dahlias like a good amount of water when growing, but will rot easily if sitting in wet soil.

Start waking up your tubers for taking cuttings or potting up indoors (if you are starting them ahead). It can take up to 6-8 weeks for tubers to start growing. Don't start them too early though as they have a tendency to get leggy if you are delayed in planting them outdoors.

March Tip

You may start getting your tuber shipments in the mail at this time depending on your zone. Open the box right away and inspect your tubers.

Knowing When To Plant

Being familiar with your planting zone and microclimate is important at this stage. Before planting out your started dahlias you need to make sure you are past your last frost date as they are tender plants. If planting tubers directly in the ground the soil needs to be at around 15°C (60°F).



In my micro-climate in Nova Scotia, I can start planting out in mid-May. When planting tubers out don't worry too much about breaking the shoot on the tuber as it will grow back.

Generally speaking, you want to plant your tubers 45-60 cm (18-24") apart and 10-15 cm (4-6") deep. The hole should be a couple of shovels wide as you will lay the tuber flat on the soil. If you are staking each individual plant you will want to do so at the time of planting so you don't spear your tuber later. Most dahlias need staking to prevent them from breaking later in the season. I add a small handful of bone meal at the time of planting to encourage root growth. Do NOT water until you see green growth!

April Tip

Add a label at the front of the hole with the plant name. At the same time make a paper copy and/or add to your phone notes or online spreadsheet. Often tags go missing through the season so it is helpful to have your records in multiple locations.

Planting Out

If you have started your tubers inside you need to make sure you harden them off before you plant them out. It takes about a week of placing them outdoors during the day and bringing them in at night to be ready for planting. This helps get them ready for temperature fluctuations and windy conditions.



At this time it is good to clear your beds of weeds and get a good layer of mulch or straw down. This helps retain moisture in the soil and reduces competition of nutrients for your dahlias.

Make sure to be on the lookout for pests in the garden. Slugs, earwigs, spider mites, stink bugs, root weevils, and aphids are all common pests that lurk in your garden. For more information on how to control pests in your area ask a local Master Gardener.

May Tip

If you are laying drip irrigation lines it is helpful to get those laid out at the same time you are planting and staking your plants. *Remember, you do not need to start watering your tubers until you see green growth above the ground.

Tying, Pinching & Fertilizing

There are many ways of tying up your dahlias as they grow. You can stake individual plants, corral a bed of plants together, or use netting to support rows of plants. I tried all three methods last year and liked the corral method best. Start tying off plants at 30-45cm (12-18") and again at 60-90 cm (24-36"). The larger your plants get the more you will have to tie off for support.



Pinching (also called stopping) will encourage your plant to branch out and produce more blooms later in the season. You simply pinch out the middle of the plant leaving 2-4 leaf pairs.

In the early stage of growth when plants are about 10-12 cm (4-5") tall you want to encourage green leafy growth with a boost of nitrogen (depending on your soil test). Later in the growth cycle, you want to encourage flower and tuber growth by adding potassium and phosphorus respectively. Dahlias are heavy feeders, but fertilizing depends on your specific soil conditions.

June Tip

Reducing the number of weeds growing around your tender new plants at this stage is important so they are not competing for nutrients and water. You can add a layer of mulch around your plants to suppress weed growth and reduce water evaporation.

Watering & Disbudding

Watering becomes more important as the plant grows and you head into the hotter days of summer. Dahlias drink heavily to help them push out blooms and new growth. Make sure you are watering deeply 3x/week. An easy way to do this is by using soaker hoses or drip irrigation to get the water where it is needed most (to the tubers).



You can water from above but you will lose more water to evaporation and may cause an issue with powdery mildew on the leaves.

Disbudding is important to do if you want to help the plant produce larger flowers and nice long stems for cutting. Each stem will produce 3 buds. You want to pinch off the two side buds allowing the larger middle one to grow. You can also pinch off the second set of buds at the lower leaf nodes to ensure longer stems.

July Tip

It is also important to look for virus and insect damage at this point of growth. There are several viruses that can cause stunted growth, lighter patterns on the leaves or misshapen leaves. However your plants could just need more water or fertilizer too. Contact your local Dahlia Society for help if you run into trouble.

Cutting Flowers

Whether you started your tubers early or planted them in the ground after the last frost date you should be seeing consistent flower production by now. Not all dahlias perform equally well as cut flowers. In general, the smaller dahlias and ball types will last longer in a vase than the larger 'dinnerplate' varieties.



It is best to cut during the coolest part of the day, either early morning or evening. Bring a bucket of cool water into the garden with you and cut the stems at a 45-degree angle. Unlike other flowers, dahlias don't open much after you cut them, so make sure they are almost fully open, but showing no signs of petal browning or dropping (on the back of the flower).

Once cut bring your flowers into the house put them in a cool room to sit for several hours. When it is time to put them in your vase add 1/4 tsp bleach to the water to prohibit bacteria growth and Enjoy! Recut stems and refresh water every other day. Most dahlias have a 4-6 day vase life.

August Tip

Cutting the stem deep into the plant will signal the plant to push out longer stems in subsequent cuttings, and the more you cut, the more flowers the plant will push out.

Until Frost Do Us Part...

September is a huge month for flowers and growth in your garden. Dahlias will continue to put on a show until the first hard frost. You may notice a slight change in colours from your early season flowers because of the temperature changes, but they will still be show stoppers.



At this point, you will be slowing down on your watering routine and discontinue using fertilizer. Your plant's main priority at this point is under the soil in tuber production.

If you want to try growing seed the following year you can stop cutting the flowers at this point to allow a seed pod to form. Keep in mind that the seed of the plant will NOT produce a clone of the adult plant. You can only grow a plant that is true to the mother plant from a cutting or tuber.

September Tip

Growing dahlias from seed is how cultivators find new dahlia varieties because each seed will be a unique plant. It takes 3-4 years for a seedling to be introduced to the public. If you have room and love surprises try growing a few plants from seed and see what you get!

Digging Tubers

The fact is that in most of our Canadian climates you must dig and store your tubers over winter or they will freeze and rot in the ground.

Before the first hard frost hits make sure you walk through your garden and replace any labels that may have disappeared.

Cut down the stalks of the plant to about 15 cm (6") tall. Insert a garden fork into the soil about a foot away from the main stalk working around in a complete circle to gently lift the clump. Using excess force will potentially break the necks off the tubers.

Once you have lifted the tubers make sure your labels get tied to them before washing otherwise you won't be able to identify them. Using a hose or the light setting on a pressure washer gently rinse off the soil still attached to each clump.



October Tip

Make sure you have all the supplies you need on hand for storage before you start digging. That way you won't have to make an emergency run to the store to get last minute supplies. I will speak more about storage in November.

Dividing & Storing Tubers

Some growers wait until spring to divide tubers, but I like to do it in the fall. Make sure the area you are working in is clean and you have all of your tools handy.

I use garden scissors, pruning shears, and a sharp knife to get the job done. You will want a cup of bleach solution to sanitize your tools between clumps. I also use cinnamon applied on the cut ends as an anti-fungal agent.

Each tuber must have 3 parts: A tuber, a neck, and part of the crown of the plant with an eye (this is why you want to be careful when digging and washing your tubers). There are many videos showing this in-depth online. Once divided label each tuber with a Sharpie™ for identification.

Make sure your tubers are dry before storing them to prevent rotting. I use vermiculite and plastic boxes to store my tubers, but there are many ways to do it depending on your storage conditions. Perfect conditions are around 5°C (40°F) with adequate humidity. *Pro Tip: Make sure your tubers are not touching the plastic and do not store on a concrete floor.



November Tip

Check on your tubers every couple of weeks looking for rotting or shriveling conditions. If you spot a problem you will be able to fix it before it negatively affects all the tubers in your collection. Too much moisture? Open the box. Too little moisture, lightly spritz with water.

Relax & Dream of Flowers

Continue to check on your tubers in storage on a regular basis, but more importantly, December is the time to take a break and celebrate all the successes of your last growing season.

Take this time to look through all the photos you took during the summer, evaluate each variety that you grew, and make a plan for what you want to grow in the upcoming year.

Ask yourself a few important questions. What are your future dahlia growing plans? Do you want to grow different varieties than you did last year? Do you want to expand or decrease your garden space? Did you make a few mistakes last year? Now is the time to do some research so you can improve on next year's gardening goals.



December Tip

Look through your dahlia wish list and research growers who will sell those varieties in their upcoming tuber sales. Sign up for their mailing lists for priority access to pre-sale dates.

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