



Growing Dahlias in Western Montana

CARE OF TUBERS AFTER PURCHASE: Until time to plant keep tubers in the plastic bag in which they were received in a cool, dry place. The bags have holes in them for some air exchange and the wood shavings help maintain a constant moisture level. Ideal storage temperature is 40-50 degrees (do not store them in the refrigerator).

WHEN TO PLANT: From mid-May until mid-June is the planting time usually recommended with about Mother's Day as the ideal time. In our area, where we can have an early fall frost, we sometimes "push the envelope." If planted prior to mid-May, you must be prepared to protect any plants that are above ground when a frost is predicted and uncover them each day when the temperatures are above freezing. I often use an inverted nursery pot with a rock on top in case of wind. In recent years we have had an early June frost so you need to be vigilant!

WHERE TO PLANT: Dahlias should be planted in well-drained soil in a sunny location, although they can tolerate some shade. Some can also be grown in pots but this can be challenging. If planted in pots, shorter, compact varieties should be selected. The pot should be at least 12 inches across and 12 inches deep. Support may be needed as well.

SOIL PREPARATION: Soil should be 55 to 60 degrees at the time of planting. Dahlias needs are similar to those of a vegetable garden. If you are adding any soil amendments such as compost, they should be dug into the soil 2 weeks prior to planting if possible. If adding commercial fertilizer, use one that is not high in nitrogen such as 5-10-10 and dig it into the beds at this time.

PLANTING: Dig a hole 4 to 6 inches deep (2-3 inches in rich organic soil if you plan to mulch). I like to scratch in a little bonemeal, mycorrhizae for good root development, and a ½ teaspoon of a timed release fertilizer such as Osmocote®. If you do not have these additives, the plant should still do fine. The dahlia tuber or small clump of tubers is laid horizontally in the hole with the eye or sprout (growth bud) pointing upward. If you break off a sprout, don't worry; another will grow to replace it. Most dahlias will need a support stake and it should be placed at this time near the eye end of the tuber. Then cover the tuber with soil. If the tuber is very small, place it on a mound of soil in the hole. Plant tubers 12 to 24 inches apart. **Do not water at this time.** The soil and the tuber itself have enough moisture for growth until the plant is above ground. Too much water at this point can cause the tuber to rot. Hold off on mulching at this point since you want the soil to continue to warm. If you have a slug or cutworm problem in your area, apply something such as Sluggo Plus™ (this is organic and safe around pets). The dahlias will take 2-4 weeks to appear above ground. After that time, if nothing is showing, you can gently dig up the tuber with your fingers to check if there is an eye and the tuber hasn't rotted. If all is okay, replant it slightly higher in the soil.

WATERING: Most areas have enough rainwater to get dahlias off to a good start. No extra watering is needed until the sprouts are above ground or you may cause them to rot. Personally, I like using drip (T-

tape) but my dahlias are planted in rows making drip an efficient means of watering. I also have several overhead Rainbird-type sprinklers for when it is very hot for extended periods or to help if light frost is predicted. Once the dahlias are above ground and established, they will require deep watering 2-3 times a week. Deep watering means the water will reach down the six inches or so to the tuber and its roots. Cut back on watering in late August so tubers will start to harden off some before first frost.

FERTILIZING: Dahlias require a low nitrogen fertilizer such as those used for vegetables (5-10-10, 10-20-20 or 0-20-20). Once a month is quite adequate (July and August). Stop adding fertilizer by mid-August since too much at time of the killing frost can cause rot during storage. Don't over fertilize. Err on the side of too little rather than too much.

WEED CONTROL: Hand weeding only since roots are not very deep. Mulching after the plants are about 12 inches above ground can greatly help with weed control and with keeping the tubers cooler during the hot summer days.

TOPPING: To promote shorter, bushier plants you can pinch or cut out the center shoot just above the third set of leaves when the plant is about 18-20 inches tall. This is only done once. I do not do this. It can happen naturally if the young plant is hit by a late frost that damages the central bud. I feel it does set back the bloom time in our climate. This might be a good technique for plants in containers to keep them bushier.

DISBUDDING: Disbudding is the process of removing the two side buds, leaving the central bud on a branch. This is worth doing if you want larger blooms with longer stems which make for better cut flowers. This can be a very time consuming process and most home gardeners do not do it. If you plan to show flowers at a fair, however, long stems and large blooms are desirable.

DEADHEADING: Deadheading is the removal of spent or dead blooms from a plant and helps the plant to have continuous blooms throughout the season. The discarded blooms can be added to your compost.

PESTS: One drawback of using mulch is earwigs. Earwigs can damage blooms even though they are good for your garden in many ways. Damp rolled newspapers can be used on the ground near your plants. Earwigs will seek shelter in the folds of the paper and you can pick them up and put the newspaper in a bucket of water. Grasshoppers can damage petals. I generally pick them off in cool, early morning hours and feed them to my chickens. Slugs can be a problem in damp locations. I use Sluggo Plus. Cutworms can remove the emerging dahlia stem right at ground level. Sluggo Plus works on them as well. Cutworm damage seems to damage the plant enough that it might not recover.

CUT FLOWERS: To bring these beautiful blooms into the house for bouquets, they should be cut in the early morning or late in the day. They should be cut at an angle and immediately placed in hot tap water. Dahlias have hollow stems and can suck up an air bubble which prevents water getting to the bloom. You can recut the stem slightly while under water and place in cold water. Any foliage below the water level should be removed. A single drop of chlorine bleach can be placed in the vase water to help prevent bacteria growth. The vase should not be placed in direct sunlight. They will last up to one week if the stem receives a new cut is made daily and water is changed.