

Dahlia classifications

Anemone-flowered, PomPon, Ball, Collarette, Border, Cactus, Semi-Cactus, Dinnerplate, Decorative (Formal and Informal), Single, Mignon, Waterlily, Peony, Orchid (Single and Double)

Dahlias grow from tubers

- A tuber is a swollen underground stem that provides the food source for the dahlia plant until the plant provides its own food via photosynthesis
- Tubers come in all shapes and sizes; some are long and skinny, some are tiny little balls
- Tuber size and shape does not matter; does not influence the size of the plant or its blooms
- The dahlia crown is located between the stem and the tubers
- To sprout new growth, a tuber must have a piece of the crown connected to it which is where the growth point eyes are located

Planting and cultivation

- Basic planting requirements
 - Soil: loose, loamy, well drained, slightly acidic pH 6.5
 - Broadcast a small amount of balanced organic fertilizer two weeks before planting
 - Sunlight: full sun, 6 to 8 hours per day between 10 am and 4 pm
- Plant in Spring when danger of frost is past (mid-May); soil temp is at least 60 degrees F
- Dig a planting hole 6" deep; mix in small amount of bone meal or compost to the hole
- Place single tubers horizontal; place tuber clumps upright (vertical)
- Space tubers 12" (for small varieties) to 24" apart – airflow is important to reduce chance of mildew
- Do not water the tuber at planting time; wait until new growth appears
- Mulch 6" away from tubers to reduce weeds and retain soil moisture
- Dahlias are thirsty plants: water deeply two to three times per week after growth appears
- Start feeding every two weeks when new growth appears
 - Feed with **low nitrogen**, higher phosphorus fertilizer OR spray foliage with fish emulsion every 10 days
 - Too much nitrogen results in bushy, leafy plants with few blooms
- When the plant starts setting buds, STOP fertilizing (mid-July/August)
- Pinching/topping off the center of young plants promotes more blooms and sturdier plants
 - Pinch when plant is about 20" tall
 - Remove the center stem down to the lower three- or four-leaf sets

Dahlias need staking – they are tall plants with heavy blooms

- Stake tall varieties; don't stake border dahlias and other types that are under 2 feet tall
- The best time to stake or cage dahlias is at initial planting so you don't damage the tuber
- Hilling soil around the plants does not work

- Single stakes, tomato cages, and bamboo pole teepees work well for home gardeners with just a few plants

Harvesting blooms

- Harvesting encourages more blooms
- Harvest stems early in the morning, avoid harvesting in hot sun
- Cut deeply into the plant – 1 to 2-foot stems; sacrifice side shoots
- When you harvest a stem, a new stem of the same length will grow
- Blooms should be 3/4 or fully open – they don't open much more after cutting
- When harvesting, place bloom stems in hot tap water and allow to cool in a shaded spot

Digging and overwintering tubers

1. After first frost, remove staking, cut plant to 6" and wait 10 days
2. After 10 days, use a fork or shovel to loosen the soil around the plant and lift tubers out of the ground
3. Clean off field soil – use air or water
4. Cure for a few days in a dry place
5. Cut out the mother tuber (crinkly texture, darker than other tubers)
6. Remove damaged tubers and discard
7. Divide tuber clumps into individual tubers in fall or spring, making sure each tuber has a decent size piece of crown to guarantee one or two eyes
8. Select a breathable storage container (paper box or bag, plastic crate lined with newspaper)
9. Lay tubers flat and cover in dry sawdust, peat moss, or vermiculite/perlite mix
10. Place sheets of newspaper between layers
11. Store in a cool garage or basement, keep at 40 degrees F – the more consistent the better

American and New Jersey Dahlia Society websites

www.dahlia.org and www.newjerseydahlia.org

Dahlia sources

- Swan Island Dahlias www.dahlias.com – view their video gallery for how-to instructions, especially for pinching plants
- Longfield Gardens www.longfield-gardens.com – see the Learn tab for excellent planting, harvesting, and storage tips

Contact the Monmouth County Master Gardener Helpline

Call us, send email, or stop in to see us; office hours are Monday through Friday 9 am-4:30 pm

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In person: Rutgers Cooperative Extension - Monmouth County Agricultural Building
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Departments → Rutgers Cooperative Extension → Master Gardener Program

