

## DAHLIAS



The dahlia is a native of Mexico and Central America where it grows wild, even on mountain slopes at altitudes of 4,000 to 8,000 feet. Spanish Conquerors discovered it in the 1500s. Other varieties can be found in the jungles of Honduras and Guatemala.

Dahlias are members of the *compositae* or sunflower family. They are capable of self-pollination. Dahlias grown today are hybrids of several other varieties. For that reason, seed from named dahlias will not produce the same blooms as the parent, but will be a mixture of the color and characteristics of the parents of that plant. Therefore, it is necessary to plant a root or a cutting of a particular variety in order to have flowers of that variety.

Dahlias are classified according to the shape and arrangement of their petals. Single-flowering dahlias have no more than a few rows of petals and show a central disc. Double-flowering dahlias have multiple rows of petals and display no central disc.

*Double flowering dahlias* include cactus, formal and informal decorative, ball, waterlily and pompom types. They are classified in the following size groups:

- AA (giant) - over 10" in diameter
- A (large) - 8-10" in diameter
- B (medium) - 6-8" in diameter
- BB (small) - 4-6" in diameter
- M (miniature) - up to 4" in diameter

*Single flowering dahlias* include single, anemone, collarete, peony, orchid, and mignon single.

### Planting

Most dahlia growers in the Inland Northwest plant their tubers in the garden the third weekend in May. Depending on the variety and type selected, dahlias may be planted in borders, along fences or walls, in beds or in rows. Dahlias grow best in full sun but will tolerate some shade. Try to select a planting site that gets at least 6 hours of sun a day. They prefer a sandy loam that is slightly acidic but dahlias will grow successfully in almost any type of soil that is well drained.

Dahlias should be staked and the stake set in the ground before the tuber is planted. A 3- to 4-foot stake will suffice for small dahlias but the large flowering types need 5- to 6-foot supports. Stakes should be 3 to 4 feet apart if large exhibition flowers are desired or 2 to 3 feet apart for smaller flowers and mass effect in beds. Tie the stem loosely to the stake throughout the season as the plant continues to grow.

The tuber may now be planted 4-6 inches deep with the sprout or eye 3-4 inches from the stake. Plant the dahlia tuber on a slight slant with growth buds towards the surface. Add bulb dust to the soil around the tuber when planting and sprinkle it on the soil surface. Plant tubers with only one sprout, except for miniatures and pompoms; on these plant all the sprouts. Cover the tuber with 2 inches of soil, filling in the hole as the plant grows. A small amount of peat moss placed directly over the eye will keep the soil loose and prevent crusting, which may hinder the sprout from coming through.

If sprouts on your tuber have started to leaf or open, they cannot be covered up by soil. Plant them above the soil and fill around them as they grow. If more than one sprout comes up after planting, carefully cut the extra sprout off below the ground. On pompoms and miniatures, allow all sprouts to grow.

### **Pinching**

Pinching is the removal of the growing center stem at a certain point in the dahlia plant's development, depending on the size dahlia being grown. Pinching encourages strong side branching, makes a plant sturdier and produces larger blooms.

#### AA and A Dahlias:

Pinch out center stem when 2 or 3 pairs of leaves appear

#### B Dahlias:

Pinch out center stem when 3 or 4 pairs of leaves appear.

#### Dahlias under 6" in diameter:

Pinch out center stem when 4 or 5 pairs of leaves appear.

#### Miniature and pompoms:

Do not pinch these as you want as many blooms as possible and you want them to be small.

### **Watering and fertilizing**

Dahlias should be watered deeply and often enough to prevent the soil from drying out. After the plants have established good growth, use a water-soluble 20-20-20 fertilizer. Start with 2 cups of solution per plant, then use 1-2 quarts per plant the next time. In early August or when the plants start to bloom, begin using a 0-10-10 fertilizer because nitrogen will cause excessive green growth at the expense of flower and root production. Water the dahlia bed well, then pour the fertilizer directly over the plant in the cool of the evening. Don't fertilize more often than every two weeks.

### **Cultivating**

After mid-July, do not cultivate more than an inch deep within 18 inches of the plant, as dahlias have shallow feeder roots. Mulch can be applied after the soil is warm.

### **Disbudding**

Removing some of the flower buds is another method of achieving quality blooms. Dahlias send out three buds at the flowering terminal - a center bud and two side buds. By carefully removing the two side buds when they are the size of a pea, the center bloom will grow stronger, larger and have a better stem. It is necessary to remove more than the top two side buds for larger blooms.

### AA and A Dahlias

Disbud 3 sets of leaves. (Disbud the terminal end and down tow more sets of leaves.)

### B Dahlias

Disbud 2 sets of leaves. (Disbud the terminal end and down one more set of leaves.)

### BB Dahlias

Disbud only the flowering terminal.

### **Insect control**

Red spider mite may be a problem during hot weather but can usually be controlled with products registered for mite control.

### **Winter care**

Digging dahlias in the fall is necessary in areas where they will freeze. After a killing frost, cut the plants off to about 6 inches above the ground. After one week, dig and wash the tuber clumps. Be sure to transfer identification tags to the clump and write on each tuber with an indelible pencil after dividing.

Dividing is usually done in the fall, using a sharp knife, leaving a piece of the crown with an eye connected to each tuber. See illustration.

Tubers can be stored in layers in vermiculite, sawdust, shavings, or peat moss. Some growers even use newspapers and plastic bags. The storage medium may need to be sprayed lightly with water, but too much moisture may cause rotting. Store in a cool, even temperature of approximately 38-40°F.

