September 2024 Helpline Happenings
Growing Dahlias for the Home Gardener

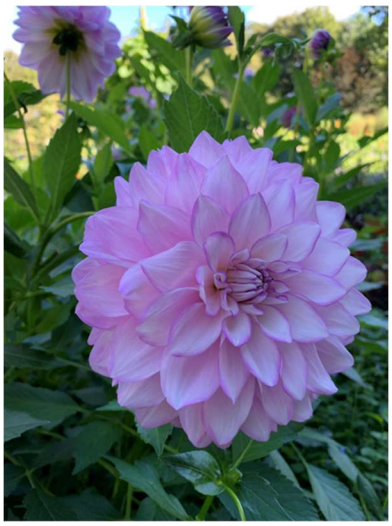
By: Jacqueline Spadaccini



Dahlias are one of the most beloved and interesting flowers to grow because of their amazing range of forms, colors, and sizes.



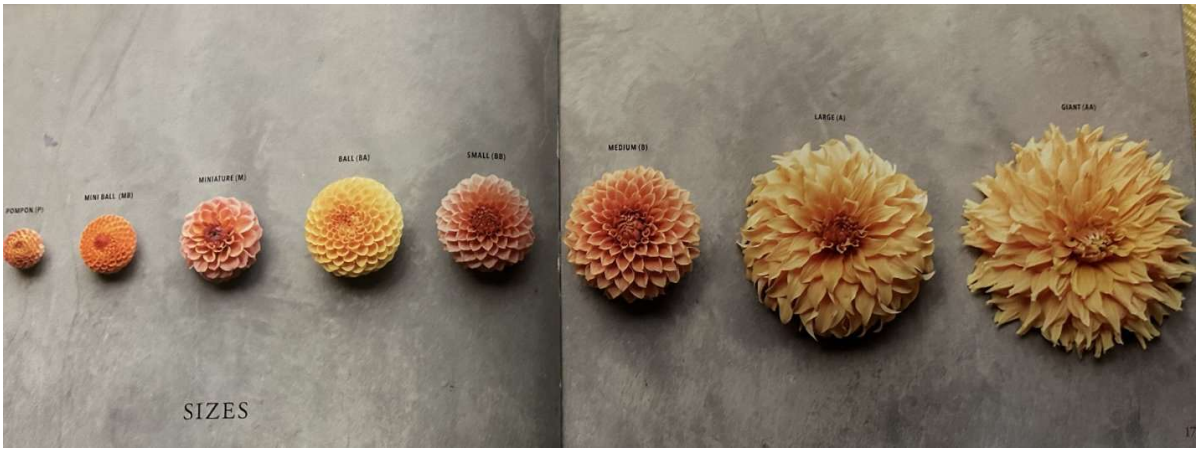




Photos this page: Jacqueline Spadaccini

With an understanding of the fundamentals, they are also relatively easy to grow for any home gardener. It has been said that the culture of growing dahlias is like that of tomatoes and indeed this is true regarding a few of the specific recommendations for success such as planting time, staking, nutrient needs and a long production period from mid-July through frost. Dahlias have 42 known species creating thousands of cultivars, encouraging avid collectors all over the world. This gorgeous flower has gained popularity in recent years mainly due to this extraordinary diversity and its exceptional beauty and elegance as a cut flower.

Dahlias are classified according to color, bloom size, and flower form with further sub-categories under each classification. Colors range from white/pale to pastel to deep oranges, pinks and purples. Various forms include orchid-flowering, anemone, collarettes, peony types, cactus, semi-cactus, decorative, ball and pompons. Some of these names indicate the plant height and the bloom size which can range from 2 to 10 inches or more. For example, the pompons are generally under 2 inches. There are also bedding dahlias, often the single type, with a yellow stamen that grow lower to the ground.





Photos this page: Chris Benzakein

Dahlias can be started in the late winter by planting seed in seed trays or tubers can be purchased from a catalog or home garden center and planted directly in the garden after all danger of frost. The last frost date here in Mercer County, NJ is usually around Mother's Day. When the weather has warmed, the tubers can be dug into a hole 4-6 inches deep in an area that receives full to partial sun (6 hours +) preferably with well-drained soil. Adding an amendment such as compost or manure is recommended. Look for the "eye" of the tuber which looks like an eye on a potato. The eye needs to be pointing up - the new plant will grow from the eye - and not planted too deep, much like peonies. Placing a sturdy 6-foot stake or tomato cage in the ground with the tuber(s) prevents damage to the tubers if inserted later. It is important to allow 2 feet of spacing for air circulation and easy access since the plants will grow bushy quickly.





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Mid-summer care requires watering to keep the soil from drying out. A general rule of thumb is to water deeply if there has been less than one inch of rain in the past week, although this does depend on the type of soil and drainage. A sandy loam may require more watering than an organically rich soil. Watering around the base helps to prevent mildew and disease. A low nitrogen fertilizer may be used to condition the soil a month after planting, if necessary. Pinching back the center stem after it has reached one foot is a technique used to allow the plant to branch out, encouraging a bushier form and more buds. Disbudding removes the side branching, promoting a longer stem for taller vases. Again, as with tomatoes, tying and supporting tall dahlias prevent breakage during winds and heavy rain. A stake, a cage or netting are all ways to support the heavy foliage and blooms of dahlias.

Like most beautiful flowers, dahlias are not without potential pests and problems. Slugs and snails love to munch on young plants, Japanese beetles can quickly eat through the buds, and

aphids, flea beetles, earwigs, thrips, and mealybugs (pictured below center) are common too. Dahlia diseases include botrytis blight (pictured below left), dahlia mosaic, ringspot, crown gall (pictured below right), and powdery mildew. Also, dahlias are browsed by deer and therefore, may need to be fenced in or sprayed with a deer repellent.





Photos, L to R: Jacqueline Spadaccini, Jacqueline Spadaccini, Chris Benzakein

Dahlias do well with the cooler temperatures of fall and will continue to bloom until frost blackens the green foliage, usually late October. For winter storage, the tubers can be lifted gently from the ground using a fork or spade.

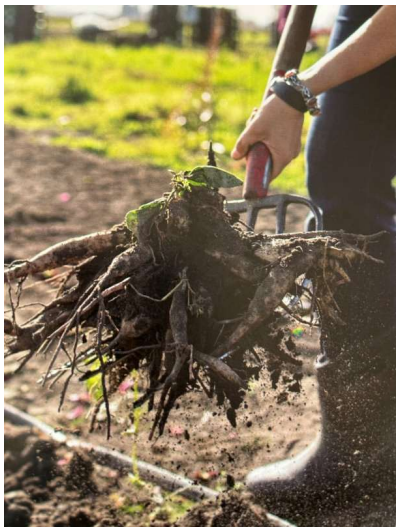


Photo: Chris Benzakein

The smaller tubers that were planted in the spring will most likely have doubled in quantity and size. A few days of drying and brushing off most of the soil is recommended because storing with moisture could cause the tubers to rot. Most gardeners choose to divide them using a sharp knife the following spring when the “eyes” are more visible, but it can be done in the fall

too. This is an easy propagation method and one or two “eyes” to each clump is all is that is needed to grow another plant the following year.





Photos L to R: Chris Benzakein and Jacqueline Spadaccini

Because our climate is changing, it is possible to leave tubers in the ground under a heavy layer of leaves or mulch, sometimes adding a tarp.





Photos L to R: Jacqueline Spadaccini and Chris Benzakein

This proves to be less effort than the alternative of digging tubers, labeling, then layering them in vermiculate or dry wood chips inside a carboard or plastic bin to be placed in a cool 35–55-degree environment like a garage. (Basements can sometimes be too warm and cause them to sprout prematurely.) Instead of using media, some gardeners have wrapped tubers in plastic wrap to assure retaining moisture during storage.

With these tips and details on growing dahlias, hopefully you’ll give them a try if you haven’t already. Dahlia bouquets are commonly seen at special fall events and weddings; adding dahlias to bouquets elevates them to a higher level of beauty and increases the value of the

arrangement. A few of the most coveted varieties include ‘Peaches n’ Cream’, ‘Linda’s Baby’, ‘Diva’, ‘Cornel Bronze’ (pictured below), and ‘Café au Lait’.


Photo by Chris Benzakein

Two fun facts: 1.) Dahlias are the national flower of Mexico, (since 1963) where they originated in the mountains of Mexico and Central America. They are considered a symbol of strength and power, representing the resilience of the people. 2) Historically, after discovering that tubers were eaten in Mexico and other countries, the Spanish first marketed dahlias as food in Europe, hoping that they would be the new potato, but most people found them distasteful. And so, after hybridization produced exciting new forms and colors, the dahlia gained popularity as a cut flower.





Photos L to R: Deborah Moyer and Chris Benzakein

Resources:

https.//extension.psu.edu/the-dirt-on-dahlias

dahlia.org/growing/fundamentals-of-growing-dahlias/

Floret Farm's Discovering Dahlias by Erin Benzakein

https://www.milkwood.net/2024/01/23/delicious-dahlias-yep-dahlias-are-edible/

https://www.fondazioneslowfood.com/en/ark-of-taste-slow-food/acocoxochitl-dahlia/

https://www.hungryonion.org/t/eating-dahlias/22827

The American Dahlia Society: https:/www.dahlia.org