

A Guide to Growing Fantastic Dahlias

From City People's Garden Store Annual Buyer Jose Gonzales

THE QUICK LOWDOWN

- Sun from 9 am- 3 pm is ideal
- Plant late April to mid-May
- Use plenty of fertilizer including bone meal
- Once blooming, add liquid fertilizer
- Water in the morning 1x week in spring, 2-3x week in summer
- Protect first growth from Slugs

THE DETAILS

Dahlias originated in Mexico and Central America. European invaders thought they might make a good food source, but found them to be gummy and tasteless. To gardeners, however, their worth is inestimable. In a good year, Dahlias will bloom from late July into November, providing your garden with a riot of color. Dahlias come in a range of types from gigantic dinner plate to the single mignon varieties. And despite their provenance in warmer regions, with a little care and attention, you can grow healthy dahlias in the Northwest.

SITING

Dahlias like light. The more light your dahlias have, the stronger their stems will be to hold up those beautiful blooms. Nevertheless, when scouting a site for your dahlias **avoid areas with hot afternoon sun**. Dahlias will bloom out more quickly in these locations and wilt. Areas with sun from 12-8 in the evening for example, are a bad idea. Ideally you are looking for an area that has direct sun from approximately 9-3. Lastly, dahlias grow best in a soil pH of 6.5-7.

PLANTING

When planting dahlias soil temperature is critical. They won't sprout in soil below 40 degrees Fahrenheit. **In Seattle that means that the best time to plant is typically, late April to May**. To give your dahlias a head start, cover the planting area with a tarp to capture heat and dry the ground out (which will also make planting a great deal more pleasant). You can also start them in 2 gallon pots in a greenhouse or brightly-lit indoor space.

How you plant your dahlias depends on your soil type. For heavy clay soil, plant your dahlia bulbs rather shallowly. To improve drainage, add some gravel to the bottom of the planting hole. **In the summer heat, mulch the root zone with a good quality compost**. If you have sandy soil plant your bulbs deeper, but be sure to mix compost into the soil to improve moisture retention and soil fertility.

FERTILIZATION

Before you push the soil back into the hole, **don't forget fertilizer**. You'll want something high in phosphorus to assure plentiful blooms. Use a bone meal or fishbone meal as well as bulb food. Dahlias need plenty of oomph to help them bloom in our cool summers. Avoid fertilizers that are too high in nitrogen—these will lead to too much green growth which will attract pests such as aphids. To get the most out of your dahlias, apply a liquid bloom-boosting fertilizer such as **Alaska MorBloom** once they're blooming.

WATERING

You'll want to water your dahlias after the initial planting of course. During June and July, **water is in the morning**. If you water at night, you'll leave them wet and vulnerable to fungal problems. In the spring, check them about once a week. Once it gets hot in July check them 3 times a week to make sure they don't dry out.

PESTS

Slugs and Snails are mostly a hazard when your dahlias first begin to sprout. Be sure that they are protected by a product like **Sluggo** or a circle of **copper taping**. If you find little holes from earwigs, you can catch them by putting corrugated cardboard at the base of the dahlia in the evening. Earwigs will crawl in the small spaces. In the morning, throw the cardboard away. In August, you might find powdery mildew developing on some of your dahlias. Don't worry too much about this. Try to keep infected leaves plucked off. If it is spreading, try using compost tea to abate the issue.

STORAGE & DIVISION

In the fall, once the plants die back, you can dig up your tubers to protect them from rotting during our wet winters. Wash away soil from the tubers you dig up. Then let them dry completely in the sun. Put them in a box with shredded newspaper, sawdust or cedar shavings. Store them in a dark, dry place. Check on them periodically in the winter for any signs of moisture or rotting. In Feb or March, when the eyes start to swell and turn red, you can cut up the tubers, making sure you leave a growing eye on each one.

ONE FINAL NOTE:

If you're interested in unique varieties of Dahlia: groups such as the [Washington State Dahlia Society](#) or the [Puget Sound Dahlias Association](#) holds sales in March and April of varieties that you won't find everywhere. They also are a great source of information and camaraderie for dahlia lovers.