

2019 is the Year of the Dahlia

Did you know that the dahlia is the national flower of Mexico? The native dahlias found in the mountains of Mexico and Guatemala are the genetic source for the modern hybrid dahlias we grow today. There are many species of dahlia in a range of colors and forms with hybrids commonly grown as garden plants. The flower varies in size and form. Each flower can be small or large, ranging from 2" in diameter to up to 15 inches. The largest flower form is informally known as a "dinner plate" dahlia.

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Getting Dahlias

There are several ways to enjoy your first dahlia. Most major garden centers, home improvement stores and mail order sources sell dahlia tubers (a thick, underground stem or rhizome) as well as blooming potted plants. A tuber looks like a sweet potato that grows under the soil surface and sends up strong stems. Additionally, almost every dahlia society has tuber and plant sales and they welcome guests to those events.



When to Plant

Your tubers can go directly into the ground in the spring when the ground is warm and there is little chance of frost. One good guideline is to plant at the same time as you would a tomato. If you want blooms as early as possible, you can start the tubers indoors in good light about a month before planting time. By starting early you could have a small plant ready to transplant at planting time.

How to Plant

Plant the tuber according to the package directions with the "eye" on the tuber facing up. The eye is the point on the shoulder, or crown, of the tuber from which the plant grows. If you are

buying potted plant dahlias, simply transplant into a prepared garden bed or decorative containers. If you are planting multiple dahlias refer to the package for spacing recommendations. Larger flowered dahlias need more space requirements to give each plant room to flourish. Most dahlias need to be staked to avoid falling over at maturity. Best practice is placing the stake prior to planting to avoid damaging the tuber and roots system. Tomato cages can also be a simple approach to staking.

Protecting Your Plants From Pests

Small dahlia plants are susceptible to slug damage. It is a good idea to manually remove slugs or to protect them with a commercial slug killer. Japanese beetles seem to enjoy dahlia blooms just when they are ready for a bouquet. One of the best methods of control is to manually remove the beetles and drop them into a bucket of soapy water. If other insects become a problem you can consider using a commercial soap or pesticide. Dahlias are low on the deer's list of favorite foods and are deer resistant.



Care and Cultivation

Dahlias do not need a lot of water; in fact, excessive watering early in the season can lead to rotting. Best practice is to monitor the soil moisture especially if the local rainfall is less than one inch per week. Dahlias in containers will require more water because of their limited soil volume.

Dahlias will generally benefit from regular treatments with a water soluble or granular fertilizer. Traditional wisdom for dahlias is to treat with a high nitrogen fertilizer early in season and then transition to a bloom-type fertilizer (lower nitrogen and higher in potassium and potash) in the middle part of the season. You should stop fertilizing later in season or about the first of September.



Your dahlias will continue to bloom prolifically right up until first frost. After a heavy frost there are two options on how to handle your dahlia. If you live in a mild climate you can remove the remaining plant material, cover the tubers with mulch such as leaves and let them over-winter in the ground. Another option is to dig and divide the clump of tubers and store them in a cool, dry place for the winter. These tubers then can be used to start new plants the following spring.



Go to the American Dahlia Society for further information on how to harvest and store your tubers.

If you have never planted dahlias, now is the time to try. With a wide diversity in flower size, color and performance you can easily see why the National Garden Bureau has selected this versatile and stunning plant as the 2019 bulb of the year.

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