



# Growing Dahlias in NSW and the ACT

## A beginner's guide to the galaxy

Dahlias are plants that can give the gardener many months of flowers to enjoy through Summer and Autumn with a little bit of effort and attention.

Dahlias have complex genetics which means they come in many shapes and sizes:

- from shorter border plants (often grown from seed) which can be around 30 cm high,
- to the larger flowered (and growing) cut flower varieties which can grow between 1 and 3 meters or more tall and produce flowers ranging from under 50mm to over 300mm.

The size of the plant does not have any relationship to the size of the flower – some of the biggest flowers grow on shorter plants while some of the smaller flowers grow on taller plants.

Dahlias will only come true to the variety through vegetative propagation (tuber or cutting) – plants grown from seed may have some of the characteristics of the parent plant but are very unlikely to be exactly the same.

Acquire your plants or tubers from experienced growers to give yourself the best chance of high quality stock that is free from disease. You do not need to chase the latest or the highest priced novelty to have great flowers but high quality stock to begin with makes a big difference.

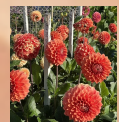
**Where can you grow dahlias?** So, you have obtained some tubers or cuttings – where can you put them? Dahlias are not as fussy as many will have you believe.

- They will grow in almost any soil as long as it does not become waterlogged. Given rain can come in large amounts all at once good drainage is helpful.
- However, they also like a nice constant supply of moisture so some way to maintain that through a watering system is a must.
- Mulch applied in early summer can help keep the roots cool, reduce the loss of moisture and suppress weeds.
- Soil pH is a much debated topic but somewhere around neutral will be fine.
- Dahlias will grow in half to full sun – in many areas full sun in summer is probably a bit much for them so part shade is recommended as it makes it easier for the plants during the day and easier to maintain the even supply of moisture.

It is a good idea before planting to have to ground enriched with a fertilizer. They really need a bit of help to grow over the first few months. Do not overdo it but a bit of good general purpose fertilizer dug in a week or so before planting should help.

**Planting** is simple really. But before you do work out how you are going to support your dahlias. They are going to grow 90 to 180 cm tall- they need your help to stay upright. Probably the easiest way is to use tomato stakes before planting which have the added benefit of marking where the tuber is and potentially holding a name tag.

Planting is from October through to Christmas with most from mid-October to mid-November. There is no rush to plant – the best flowers will be in Autumn.





Spacing should be about 40 to 60 cm apart and you can grow one or two plants to a stake – one is easier to manage.

- Dig a small hole about 10 to 15 cm deep
- Lay the tuber in hole with the eye near the stake
- Fill in the hole,
- Keep the soil moist (not wet!) – in early spring when the soil is cold and wet that probably means don't water but in late November in a drought when the soil is hot and dry you will need to water.

**Care over the first couple of months** When the shoots emerge from the ground, they are a joy to behold – for the gardener and for every slug and snail in the neighborhood. You will need to protect them. Other critters will also have a snack – remember these are a luxury product.

When you get about 4 pairs of leaves on the plant it is time to pinch out the growing tip (called **stopping**). This is designed to make the plant branch and give you more flowers. As a result, the plant will now have seven or eight branches which emerge from the leaf axils. When you pinch out the plant that is a good time to put on the first tie to the stake.



This is also a good time to get the weeds out and get that mulch on. You might want to give the plants another feed with general purpose fertilizer before putting the mulch on.

### **Here come the flowers**

As flower buds emerge growers try to trick the plant into giving us better flowers with better stems, and repeat flowering quickly. Each branch will produce a terminal bud and two side buds. If the two side buds are removed the plant puts more energy into the main flower bud and immediately starts to put energy into the side buds lower down the branch. We call this **disbudding**.



For larger varieties more of the side branches are removed. To keep your dahlias flowering for months it is important to cut the flowers either to use as cut flowers or as they go past their best in the garden. For those stems that have been disbudded this is easy enough and the plant often has another flower well on the way.

### **And the season comes to an end**

With winter the season comes to an end.

There is no rush to dig your dahlias. In fact, most gardeners would be better off digging in October when they can see the eyes on the plants rather than in Winter. And if you don't want to dig you don't need to dig every year – they will survive happily in the ground. However, for quality flowers it is a good idea to dig and divide regularly. There is a lot more to know but enjoy your dahlias and, most importantly,

**DON'T PANIC: => Join the Dahlia Society of NSW & ACT if you want to know more**

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