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Specializing in plants that thrive in Central Ohio

Growing Dahlias



Dahlias are considered one of the most spectacular garden flowers. They are also thought to require a great deal of care. Both of these statements are true to some extent. There is a great variety of form in dahlias, from the showy dinner-plate size to the bright, little single ones. Dahlias require some special care, especially lifting for winter storage. However, with minimum care, beautiful dahlia blooms will grace your garden from July until frost. Dahlias should be planted in a sunny location. The soil should be rich and well-drained with a pH of about 6.5. Wait until all danger of spring frost is past before planting.

Bedding dahlias can be planted 9 to 12 inches apart. The smaller-flowering types, which are usually about three feet tall, should be spaced two feet apart. The taller, larger-flowered dahlias should be spaced three feet apart. Dig the planting hole slightly larger than the root ball of the plant and incorporate some compost or sphagnum peat moss into the soil. Plant dahlias so the crowns are just above soil level. Tall, large-flowered cultivars will require support. Place stakes (five to six feet tall) around plants at planting time and tie stems to them as the plants grow.

Dahlias tend to have shallow roots so be careful when cultivating. About the end of June, mulch plants with well-aged compost, aged manure, peat, or straw. Water plants regularly if rain is insufficient but avoid wetting the foliage. Dahlias require a rich soil: a commercial fertilizer low in nitrogen, such as a 5-20-20, worked into the soil a month before planting is good preparation. As plants grow, a monthly feeding will encourage large blooms. If using a granular fertilizer, water it in thoroughly after application. Do not fertilize dahlias after mid-August.

When the plants reach a height of three to four inches, pinch the terminal bud just above the second pair of leaves. This will produce two main stems. When flower buds are visible, begin disbudding. This will increase the bloom size of the leader bud and improve the flower stem formation. Flower buds come in three's. The central leader bud will produce the largest bloom. There will be a smaller flower bud on each side of the leader bud. Remove these side buds by pinching or cutting to the base of the leaf axil. Further down the same stem, two more buds will be found in the leaf axils and these, too, should be removed.

Flowers should be cut when fully opened. Early morning cutting will provide the longest lasting cut flowers. As soon as you cut the bloom, plunge the stem into water. Major pests of dahlias include aphids and slugs early in the growing season, and mites in mid- to late-summer. Thrips, earwigs, caterpillars, and wasps may occasionally attack dahlias. Consult your county Extension agent for recommended controls. Leafspot and dahlia wilt also can be problematic. Should the leaves yellow in a random pattern, submit a sample for diagnosis. A plant with a viral infection should be removed from the garden immediately. Also, destroy plants with abnormal or deformed crowns.

Lift dahlias after the first frost or before the end of October. Before lifting tubers, remove all ties. Stakes should be cleaned, repaired, and stored. Attach name labels to the base of the main stem of named cultivars. Cut the foliage off so that there remains a three to four inch stem on the roots. Because tubers may have spread quite a distance, begin digging far enough from the plant so as not to damage them. A spading fork or spade works well for this task. For easier lifting make several cuts into the soil with the fork or spade around the clump and gently pry to raise the tubers intact.

Once the tubers are out of the soil, remove as much soil as possible without damaging the tubers. Turn the tubers upside down to drain the stem and allow the soil to dry. When dry, remove the remainder of the soil. Soil may also be washed from the tubers with water under pressure. Cut off any small roots. Remove and discard tubers that are damaged or diseased, and dust any cut surfaces with sulfur. Place the tubers in wooden flats, bushel baskets, or cardboard boxes that have a few inches of peat moss, sawdust, or vermiculite in the bottom. Then cover them with the same packing material, leaving the stems exposed. A little moisture may be added to prevent shriveling. Place the packed tubers in a dry, 40 F to 50 degrees F location.

Check tubers in a few weeks and again in January for signs of shriveling or fungal infection. Add a small amount of moisture if shriveling has occurred. Do not expect 100 percent survival.

Bring the tubers out of storage in March or April and locate eyes on each tuber. With a sharp knife, divide the tubers with a portion of crown attached, so that each piece has an eye. If eyes are not evident, place the tubers in moist leaf mold, peat, or soilless mix. In a week or two the eyes will appear. Pot the divisions in a sterilized, soilless mix or porous potting soil with the crown above the potting medium. Provide the potted divisions with maximum sunlight and a temperature of about 55 degrees F. Water when the potting mix dries to a depth of one inch. Good ventilation will help prevent disease.

Cuttings may be taken from new growth but do not cut below the first set of leaves. Cuttings should be three to four inches long.

Dahlias may also be propagated from seed. This method is used most often for bedding dahlias. Because of cross-pollination, they will not come true to cultivar. Harvest seeds in September and October. Cut the ripened flower heads open and lay them out to dry on shallow trays. When dry, the seeds will readily separate from the chaff. Store them in sealed containers. Seeds can be sown indoors in February or March; germination takes about one week.



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Digging & Storing Cannas, Dahlias, Gladioli & Tuberous Begonias



Cannas:

Preparing Cannas For Canna Bulb Storage:

Before you can start storing canna bulbs, you must first lift the bulbs from the ground. Wait to dig the cannas up until after a frost has killed back the foliage. Once the foliage is dead, carefully dig around the canna bulbs. Remember that canna bulbs can multiply rapidly over the summer, so you will want to start digging a bit further out from where you originally planted the canna. Remove the canna bulbs from the ground and divide them if necessary. The next step in preparing canna bulbs for storage is to cut the foliage back to 2-3 inches. Then gently wash the dirt off the bulbs but do not scrub the canna bulbs clean. Scrubbing can cause small scratches on the skin of the bulbs that can allow disease and rot to get into the bulbs. Once the canna bulbs are washed, you can prepare them for canna bulb storage by curing them. In order to cure the bulbs, place them in a dry place, like a garage or a closet, for a few days. Curing allows the skin of the bulbs to toughen up and helps to keep rot at bay.

How To Store Canna Bulbs:

After the canna bulbs are cured, you can store them. Wrap them in either newspaper or in paper bags. The best way to store canna bulbs is in a cool dry place, such as a garage, the basement or a closet. You can even store canna bulbs in the refrigerator in the crisper drawer, if you have enough room. While wintering canna bulbs, check them every month or so and remove any bulbs that may start to rot. If you find that more than a few are rotting, you may want to find a drier place for canna bulb storage.

Dahlias:

Storing Tubers For Winter:

At the end of the growing season, tuber-grown dahlias should be dug and stored for the winter in a frost-free place. Immediately after the first frost and after leaves have blackened, cut the stem back to about six inches above the ground. Then use a fork to loosen the soil around the tuber and lift out of the soil. Remove surplus soil from the tuber.

Place the tubers upside down in a dry airy space for about two weeks. This allows moisture to drain out of stems. The tubers need to be completely dry before they are stored for the winter. Next store the tubers in trays of dry sand or peat moss in a cool, dry cellar or storage area at about 40 to 45 degrees F. Never store at a much higher temperature, as dahlia tubers will dry out and shrivel rapidly.

Another method of storing includes placing tubers in a heavy-grade, black plastic bag without additional packing material. Then seal the bag. This will prevent the tubers from dehydrating. Keep the tubers in a frost-free area. The danger exists, however, that they will sweat and rot.

Inspect the tubers every few weeks during the winter to check for disease or shriveling. Cut off any diseased parts and, if the tubers have shriveled, place them in a bucket of water overnight to plump them up. Allow them to dry thoroughly before returning them to storage.

Gladiola:

Digging Up Gladiolus:

Many people make the mistake of digging up gladiolus corms too early by doing it before the foliage has died. For the proper gladiolus winter care, you should wait until the first frost has killed off the foliage above the ground. After a gladiolus flower spike is done blooming, the plant concentrates its energy into the corm at the base of the stem. Digging up gladiolus can start about eight weeks after this, but you can do it any time until the frost arrives. Knowing when to dig up gladiolus corms might be the trickiest part, but it's generally safe if you wait until all of the plant matter has turned brown and died back. Once the foliage is brown, you can start gently digging up the gladiolas corms from the soil.

Storing Gladiolus Bulbs:

Dig the corms of gladiolus using a garden fork or spade, digging far enough away so that you don't touch the corm. Pull the plant by its dried leaves and shake it gently to remove any loose dirt. You may see some miniature corms growing on the bottom, which you can grow into full-sized plants in a couple of years. The next step in gladiolus winter care is to "cure" the gladiolus corms. Leave dug corms on top of the soil for two days to allow them to dry. Transfer the corms to a cardboard box and place it in a warm dry place with good air circulation, at about 85 F. (29 C.). Keep the corms here for about two weeks to allow them to dry completely. Separate the parts of the corm after they are dry. Gladiolus forms a new corm on top of last year's old one, and you'll be able to separate the two after drying, as well as removing the cormlets. Discard the old corm, and place the new corms and cormlets back into cardboard boxes, after removing any excess dirt you may find. At this time, you can also cut the dead foliage off.

When storing gladiolus bulbs, it's important that you defend against rotting and diseased corms. Inspect them before final storage, throwing away any you find that have soft spots or mushy places. Dust the corms with an anti-fungal powder before putting them away for the winter. When thinking how to store gladiolus over the winter, think about imitating the environment the corms would experience in nature, only just a little bit better. Place them in single layers in cardboard boxes with newspaper in between the layers, or store them on screens or in onion bags. You may also place the corms in a breathable bag, like a paper bag, a cloth bag or nylon pantyhose. This will allow the air to continue to circulate around the gladiolus corms while they are being stored. Keep the corms in a cool, dry spot just about freezing, or around 40 degrees F. (4 C.). Many people choose the vegetable bin in their fridge or an attached garage to store their gladiolus corms. An unheated basement or enclosed porch is ideal as well. Store the corms until next spring, when all chance of frost has passed.

Tuberous Begonias:

In areas that freeze during the winter, tuberous begonias must be dug up and the tubers stored indoors for the winter. The time to do this is after you've had that first light frost that ruins the foliage. This is a type of forced dormancy by the weather. A light frost won't damage the tuber under the ground but a hard one will.

In cold climates, after the foliage has been ruined by the first light frost, dig up the entire plant with its tuber. Gently remove all the soil from the tuber and any loose roots. Check for pests or for rotted areas. Rotted areas can be removed with a sharp knife and dusted with a fungal powder. Lay the entire plant in a warm dry area for several days to thoroughly dry the tuber. Make sure to bring them indoors at night if it's going to freeze. Once the tuber is dry the stem/stems should detach easily. If they don't, it isn't dry enough yet, wait a while longer. *(Don't be overly concerned if you broke the tops off while digging or by accident, they should still be fine, it's just better if they come off naturally because there will be less chance of rotting.)*

- Once your tubers are thoroughly dry, place each tuber into a separate paper bag and place the bags into a cardboard box for storage. The reason for the individual bags is so that pests or disease can't spread easily to the entire collection and because they will allow the tubers to breathe. Keep the box in a dark, dry, cool place for the winter (*cool, not cold, slightly below room temp*). Check the tubers periodically to make sure none are rotting and that no pests have gotten into them. Again rotted spots can be removed and the tuber re-dried and dusted if they aren't too bad.

