



Digging and Storing Your Dahlia Tubers for Winter

In some parts of the country, gardeners can leave their Dahlia tubers in the ground over the winter. Unfortunately, that is not the case here in Minnesota. Even under thick mulch, the tubers would freeze and turn to mush by spring. The best plan is to dig up dahlia tubers and store them in a cool (not freezing) and dry place for winter.

It is important to wait at least a week or two after a hard frost before digging. The tubers in the ground are ripening and preparing for winter. New sprouts are forming on the tubers. Dahlia roots continue to grow and develop after light frosts. The eyes (sprout buds) become more defined. Tubers dug too early will not store well. The longer that the tubers are in ground, the more mature they become, but be sure to dig before the ground starts to freeze.



Cut the stem down to about 6 inches. When digging, use a stout shovel or spade to cut through the smaller roots at the ends of the tubers and then loosen the soil. Loosen the soil on all sides, about a foot from the stem as you dig. Carefully lift the clump from the ground, taking care not to damage the young sprouts, break the tubers, or damage the skin. The neck area of the clump contains the eyes of the tubers and is especially fragile. Microbes that cause rotting or diseases can enter broken areas. Leave the stem intact with the rest of the clump. The American Dahlia Society recommends digging the clump in the morning and letting it dry for a few hours, so that the tubers become less fragile.

Gently brush off excess soil. Rinse the tubers clean with a gentle stream of water. Carefully wash in between the tubers to remove all soil. Don't wash the skin off the tubers. Remove damaged tubers, very old portions, and rotted sections. Some gardeners place a screen over a garbage can and wash their tubers there; later, they empty the soil into their gardens. Another idea is to wash over a compost pile. Tubers may be divided at this time, or stored in clump form and divided later in spring. Division is done with a sharp knife. Make sure to include at least one eye per division. Discard tubers without eyes, as these will not grow. Dust the cut portions with insecticide/fungicide. If you have had problems with bulbs rotting over the winter, some authorities recommend soaking the tubers in a weak bleach solution (1 cup per gallon of water) for 15 minutes. Dry thoroughly. Select the best and firmest tubers for storage and spring planting.

Let the tubers dry upside down for 1-3 days, depending on the temperature and humidity. Avoid excessive drying; don't dry so much that the tubers shrivel or get hard. Trim the stem and trim off small roots. Inspect the tubers for insects and disease, and dust with a product labeled for dahlias. Read and follow package directions carefully. Place the tubers into perforated plastic bags (vegetable produce bags) or boxes and cover with slightly damp coarse vermiculite, sawdust, or sphagnum peat. Tubers should not touch. Store in a dark place at 40 to 50 degrees F. Make sure to label the dahlias for identification later. Tubers may be labeled with magic marker right on the skin, or a label may be inserted into or attached to the container. Check all the tubers monthly to make sure that they have not shriveled (moisten the storage medium) or are not rotting (treat with fungicide powder or discard if you cannot save them). Some people have had tremendous success with wrapping dried and disinfected dahlia tubers in saran wrap and storing as described above (<http://thedahliaguy.blogspot.com/>, <http://www.dahlia.org/index.php?page=saran-wrap-tuber-storage>). Even with the best of care, some loss may happen. Good luck with your dahlia storage.

Happy Gardening,
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