

DAHLIA GROWING GUIDE FOR SOUTHERN GARDENS

GROWING DAHLIAS IS NOT DIFFICULT IF YOU FOLLOW A FEW BASIC GROWING PRINCIPLES. THERE ARE TWO BASIC ISSUES THAT GROWERS AND POTENTIAL GROWERS ASK ABOUT MORE THAN ANYTHING ELSE THAT ARE SO IMPORTANT THEY WILL BE ANSWERED AT THIS POINT IN THE GROWING GUIDE.

MY TUBER(S) ROTTED AFTER I PLANTED THEM--This is a common problem that too many people experience. Tubers don't have roots when you plant them and it takes them about two weeks to sprout so you must have a well dug out bed and a light soil for good drainage. The soil temperature needs to be 70 degrees or they will not start growing. Do not water the planted tubers, let the Spring rains take care of that. When the plant is 4"-6" high you may water. You can also start tubers indoors or outdoors after frost, in pots, only lightly watering the tuber and allowing them to get sunlight after a few days with no sun and only filtered sunlight outdoors. After they are growing well they can be transplanted. Sometimes the quality of stock can be an issue and some will just rot.

MUST I DIG MY TUBERS IN THE FALL--In a word NO! In Georgia the ground does not usually freeze so you may leave them there. Make sure you mulch them with pine straw or other material about 4-6" over the tubers. After you cut the stalks off put a cap of tin foil secured with a rubber band so water won't get into the stalk and rot the crown as that is where the eyes are for next year's growth. They need to be divided every two or three years in order to keep the quality of flowers proper and the mass of tubers under the ground manageable.

SOIL PREPARATION--DAHLIAS need at least 6 hours of sun a day and more is preferable, up to 10 to 12 hours a day. Late afternoon shade is OK. Try and get your PH between 6.2 and 6.8. 6.5 is optimal. Dig your bed out between 12" and 18" deep as DAHLIAS **must have well drained soil.** Add lots of COMPOST, Black Kow or any other type of organic humus as they are heavy feeders. Replace your Georgia clay if you can with a better type of soil or mix with peat and/or sand. Raised beds need to be 10" or 12"x 2" boards and a good garden soil mix.

PLANTING--Plant your tubers when you plant tomatoes as the soil must be around 70 degrees. May 1st -15th is a good planting range. Dig the planting hole down to 3"-6" and lay the tuber in the hole with the growing tip upward. Place a 5'-7' stake next to the eye end **when you plant** for tying the plant as it grows. Cover with soil and **do not water.** Place your tubers anywhere between 18" and 24" apart and rows at least 24" to 36" apart.

FERTILIZING--You can use Osmocote 14-14-14 about a tablespoon and a half per plant spread on top of the ground and worked in to about 1". Around August 1st you will need to use something else as the Osmocote runs out. A 5-10-10 or 6-12-12 or 5-20-20 can be used and then stop all nitrogen around the first of September unless we are short of rain. Some people use Miracle Grow Rose Food. Too much nitrogen late in the season causes the tubers to rot during the winter. In addition Foliar feeding is also recommended.

MULCHING--Mulching is **very important when growing DAHLIAS in the South.** DAHLIAS came from a warm days and cool nights climate of the mountains of Mexico and not the hot days and the not very cool nights of Georgia. DAHLIA feeder roots run only about 1" under the soil and can extend out from the plant up to 2' in all directions. We must compensate for our heat by growing heat tolerant DAHLIAS first and secondly

mulching our plants with at least 2" or more with a good mulch that will let the water through and keep the roots cool so they will grow during the heat of the summer. Make sure you follow this step and put the mulch down by the first of July.

WATERING--DAHLIAS like a lot of water but do not like wet feet so again make sure the soil is well drained. Water about once a week unless dry and make sure it is a deep watering. Do not water the foliage as that will encourage mildew and fungus problems.

STOPPING & DISBUDDING--To create a compact bushy plant with more flowers, pinch out the center growing stalk when the plant is around 1' high and has at least 3-4 sets of leaves. **You will only need to do this once.** Each lateral will eventually shoot three buds. You may (optional) pinch out the two side buds and leave the central bud growing if you want to increase the size of the one bloom. This is effective on BB (4-6"), B(6-8"), A (8-10"), AA (over 10") sized DAHLIAS.

SPRAYING--All of the bugs like the tender shoots of DAHLIAS and many of the leaf diseases can be a problem in our hot and humid weather so your DAHLIAS will do a lot better if you spray weekly. Whatever you use for your other plants will work for DAHLIAS too. When the hot weather comes, sooner or later you will start getting the two spotted spider mite attacking you plants and will need to use a miticide weekly in order to keep them under control. The best one is Avid but it is very expensive. Do not use Kelthane as it will kill your plants. You can purchase Avid in a pint sized container at www.southernag.com Any good fungicide will work if used often enough. In the late season the cucumber beetles will eat holes in your blooms along with bud worms. Lanate is the best product for your blooms but it is very toxic so use it very carefully. In Georgia you must have a license to purchase Lanate. Sevin will work also but may discolor.

WINTER STORAGE--Tubers left in the ground, mulch with 4-6" of material and then dig in early April to divide, allow to dry for 24 hours and then replant when the soil warms up. Make sure you have an eye and at least one tuber per division. **If you would like to dig & store your tubers each winter, which can be a difficult task, I would suggest the following procedures:** (1) Do nothing until two weeks after a hard frost has killed your plants. Leave them in the ground in the cold weather for this time period as it allows the tubers to cure (the skin gets tough and the tubers hard). (2) Dig and wash with a hose and let dry (NOT IN THE SUN OR ON CONCRETE). Bring into a cool area and store in boxes with paper on top until dividing. If you are going to divide them now make sure you complete the process within 3-4 days of digging. (3) If you want to divide your tubers now (this is when it is the easiest) do so with a good piece of the crown on each division as that is where the eyes are located. (4) After dividing allow the cut tuber to heal for 24 hours by air drying. Then shake and bake your tubers in sulfur/vermiculite mix and roll up in Saran Wrap to make an air tight lock and tape to make sure it is airtight. To read an article on this system go to www.dahlia.net click on North American Dahlia Societies and scroll to the Michigan Dahlia Association and then scroll to the article. This system works very well if you follow it correctly. (5) Store your wrapped tubers or all tubers in a basement or unheated area of your home between 38-55 degrees. Check monthly for rotting or shriveling tubers. **Uncut tubers, store in boxes with at least 8 to 12 folds of newspaper on all sides and in coarse vermiculite.**