

October Dahlia Growing Guide: Overwintering Your Dahlias

Cutting Back, Lifting, Dividing, and Storing

With the growing season almost over, it is time to start overwintering your dahlias. Dahlias are tender plants and will not survive the winter in the Midwest if left outside in the ground. You need to lift your tubers and store them if you want your plants to come back next year.

You need good tuber formation on the plant to survive storage. Tubers are an underground stem, and tuber formation in dahlias is related to shorter day length (the time between sunrise and sunset). Tubers start to form on dahlia plants when the daylength drops below 14 hours a day. In October the daylength has already decreased from its high of over 15 hours in June to less than 12 hours.

The first step in overwintering is cutting back the stalks (all of the above-ground portion of the plant) to a few inches above ground. Some members wait for a hard frost before cutting the stalks. Others, due to the number of plants and limited time, start cutting back the plants any time after October 1. The eyes (the buds on the tuber – remember a tuber is an underground stem) are easier to spot after a frost if you can wait. You will know when we have had a hard frost because the plant turns black.

With a garden fork placed about 8-10 inches from the portion of the stalk you left on the plant, insert the fork into the ground and gently lift. The stalk with the tubers should easily lift out of the ground. Make sure after you lift that you keep your label with your tubers.

Once lifted you will need to wash the tubers. Typically, since our soil is heavy clay, you will need to use a strong spray on a garden hose to wash off all the dirt. After cleaning let the tuber sit to dry. This may be 24-48 hours. A member had a good tip that you will know that your tuber is dry enough to store if you can write the name of the variety with a Sharpie on the tuber.

You can then store the whole clump of tubers overwinter or divide them. Most members divide them in the fall as they are more easily stored. Dividing tubers is an art since you need an eye (a bud) on the neck of the tuber in order to produce plants next year and finding eyes is challenging at times. You can use a knife, PVC cutters, or other tool to cut the tuber clump once you find an eye. Make sure to sanitize your cutting tools between plants. Once divided, you will need to find a storage container that will enable you to keep the tuber between 40-50 degrees and with enough humidity that the tubers do not shrivel and dry out. There are many ways to store tubers such as in cedar shavings, in vermiculite or wrapped in Saran Wrap.

Hopefully, this gets you started on overwintering. Our October 9th meeting will provide even more details about overwintering. Another resource is Kristine Albrecht's videos on overwintering such as #156 Washing, Dividing, and Storing

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mVVpAWeAVvE&t=267s>

This is our last monthly "to do" column for the 2022 growing season. See you in 2023!

Submitted by Justine Dial and Laura Matz. Adapted from the Puget Sound Dahlia Association.