

July Ask the Experts: Disbudding, Lateral Management, Insect & Mildew Control

As I write this month's column, (June 27), Chicago has been given the unexpected and dubious distinction as the city with the worst air quality in the world. The National Weather Service issued air quality alerts for much of the Great Lakes region due to the dangerous levels of particulates in the air caused by Canadian wildfires and the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency urged people to stay indoors.

"Ah, but I have to check on my dahlias," I said to myself. As I stepped outside, I could see the haze hanging low in the sky, and I was surprised to detect a faint burning scent in the air.



Rusty's dahlias are in the ground and looking good!

Surveying the 50 some pots of dahlias scattered about my patio, (I have to grow in pots as my beds are too shaded by mature trees) thankfully they didn't need watering. I watered a few planters filled with vegetables and herbs as well as my hummingbird planter and sprayed a few shots from my hose on some poor languishing coleus, bittermelon, tomato and snapdragon seedlings still confined to their seed starting pods. I promised myself (yet again) to get them planted tomorrow. I frowned at my dahlia cuttings, still not sure of where they'll be planted or rehomed and I poked around the garden doing the mundane but essential tasks that gardeners do. I probably stayed out longer than I should have (but nowhere near as long as I normally spend outside during the peak of planting time).



My hummingbird planter with salvia, lantana, sweet potato vine and dahlias - Labella Grande Magenta and Happy Days Purple. Hummingbirds visit every day!

"This is a good reason to go back indoors and write my column for this month," I encouraged myself. I sincerely hope, by the time you're reading this, the

air is clear again and our outdoor activities have returned to normal!

Last month our experts shared their best tips on staking and fertilizing. In this month's column, experts **David Sales** and **Rusty Richie** explore disbudding, lateral management and the dreaded topic of insect and mildew control. We won't be covering the rather extensive topic of viruses and gall in this column but please check out the [Resources page on CSDS website](#) for several helpful links on those issues from various sources including the American Dahlia Society.

Let's check in with our experts. This month's background question is "What is your biggest nemesis in dahlia growing?"



David Sales: Wascally wabbits! My backyard is overrun with dahlia-loving rabbits. I need to strictly fence in all my planting beds. Rabbit "repellents" have been ineffective.



Rusty Richie: I still have about 200 dahlias to plant, and the body has been reminding me that you can only do so much. So I guess my greatest nemesis is Time. What used to take a day now takes a week. Time also dictates that certain chores in the garden are best done early in the day, or late in the day. Creatures of habit, as most of us are, can find it difficult to change working hours from a typical "9 to 5" into a summer schedule of 7:00am to 10:30am and then 7:00pm to 10:00pm. Of course, another nemesis we all face is Mother Nature, who happens to be a good friend of Time. Between the two of them, do we really have a chance?



What tips do you have regarding disbudding dahlias?

David Sales: I prefer to enjoy a lot of dahlia blooms. Whenever the plant produces a triplet of buds, I remove the two side buds and let the center bud bloom.

Rusty Ritchie: Disbudding is best done during the cooler part of the day. The bud snaps off cleanly compared to during the heat of the day, when stringy fibers hang on to the stem and you take more than the bud, leaving a scar on the stem. With smaller varieties you may just remove one pair of buds or side shoots, but with larger varieties, I might remove all potential side shoots except one. Some varieties naturally have shorter stems than others and different growing habits. Allowing a side bud to grow instead of the center bud can produce a better stem in some cases, but I only do this when I know the variety is notorious for short stems (Nicholas comes to mind).

First disbud in my own garden two weeks ago. This dahlia was overwintered in its pot so it had quite the head start. You can see the stubs left on either side of the main bud after snapping off the side buds. Disbudding is promoted so the plant can develop a better and larger single bloom rather than splitting its energy into three typically smaller blooms.

What lateral management practices do you employ? What considerations do you take into account when making decisions on what to trim?

David Sales: I preserve four laterals for AA and A varieties, six for B's and don't limit laterals for smaller blooms.

Rusty Ritchie: Many of the best cut-flower varieties of dahlias require minimal lateral control. You take the top off after four or five sets of leaves and a month later you begin cutting blooms. Of course, disbudding produces better blooms, and as long as you keep up with cutting flowers, or dead-heading, you can have blooms until frost. The exhibition varieties can be a little finicky and won't produce buds if too many laterals are developing. About the end of June, I like to make sure all my plants have been 'topped'. A week to 10 days later I'll go through and decide which laterals stay and which go. Typically, AA and A sized varieties should have four laterals, B sized might have six laterals, and the smaller varieties can have eight or more. Since most of my plants are supported by a wire fence, the laterals I select are growing away from the fence. If I can, I select only one of the two laterals at a leaf node, and that can stagger the blooms so you can have one each week, during the shows.

What are the typical insects you incur in your dahlia growing or might be most common to growers?

Rusty Ritchie: Every year I have to deal with earwigs. Spraying around the stakes, stalks, and posts with *Sevin* usually does the trick. I only spray the lower parts of the plant because they come from below.

Beetles and grasshoppers have their season... as in hunting season. I don't find joy in squeezing the life out of a grasshopper, but I must admit a bit of satisfaction in hearing the crunch of a beetle. For mites I use stuff I'm not proud of, but sometimes mites will wipe out your garden before you know it. That's why you should spray preventively while the plants are small, rather than later in the season when you will need 20 times the amount of pesticide.



Some products Rusty uses for pest issues.

David Sales: For mites, I spray prophylactically with stilet oil, being careful to follow application directions. When Japanese beetles attack blooms, I spray with *Eight* brand spray.

How do you deal with powdery mildew in your garden? What practices do you recommend to help limit it?



Powdery mildew looks like a dusting of white powder but it is actually a fungal disease.

Rusty Ritchie: Neem oil is a great ally in battling powdery mildew, but it is important to remove damaged foliage. Doing this before spraying vastly reduces the amount of spray you need. Removing lower leaves from your plants and thinning out excessive laterals will help keep the mildew from spreading as quickly.

David Sales: Sulfur oil helps in prevention. For more involvement, I spray with sulfur. More importantly, I try to optimize air circulation and remove dead foliage.

A huge thank you to David, Rusty and Steve for taking time to share their helpful tips during this growing season thus far. This month and the next couple months are especially busy for dahlia growers so I know it's been even more challenging to find time to participate in this column. We appreciate their contributions! In the coming months we will be asking our experts for tips on grooming and preparing for shows. Please feel free to email me at vidago8432@gmail.com with any questions you may have regarding showing dahlias or any other dahlia topic and we'll do our best to feature it.

Column edited by Vida Wu. Photos by Rusty Ritchie and Vida Wu.