

# Home & Garden Education Center



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EXTENSION

## Dahlias are Delightful

By Dawn Pettinelli, UConn Home & Garden Education Center

The hazy, hot and humid days of summer may have us seeking air conditioned comfort but the dahlias are basking in the warmth and their blossoms are bursting forth in all manner of colors and shapes. Their tough nature and long bloom period are likely some of the reasons that the National Gardening Bureau selected dahlias as its 2019 Bulb of the Year.

Actually, dahlias do not technically grow from bulbs but from tuberous roots. While a tuber is a swollen stem with growth nodes or eyes (think potato), a tuberous root is a thickened root that serves as a food storage organ for the plant. Typically, several tuberous roots are connected to the bottom of a stem or growing point. As the plant grows, it draws on stored reserves in the tuberous roots. These are replaced by new ones at the end of the growing season. Just as a point of interest, a sweet potato is a tuberous root.

Tuberous root image by Dawn Pettinelli, UConn.

Dahlias are native to Mexico. Spanish invaders brought them back to Spain where they eventually made their way to France, England and Germany. The Empress Josephine grew them in her garden at Malmaison. Andrew Thovin, the curator of Jarden du Roi tried investigating the tuberous roots as a food source. While they are edible, apparently they were not tasty.



Personally, I would much rather admire their gorgeous flowers than eat their roots. In New England, dahlias are not hardy and the tuberous roots need to be dug up and stored over the winter or new ones could be purchased each spring. They are reasonably priced so for those unwilling to overwinter the roots, dahlias are still a bargain.

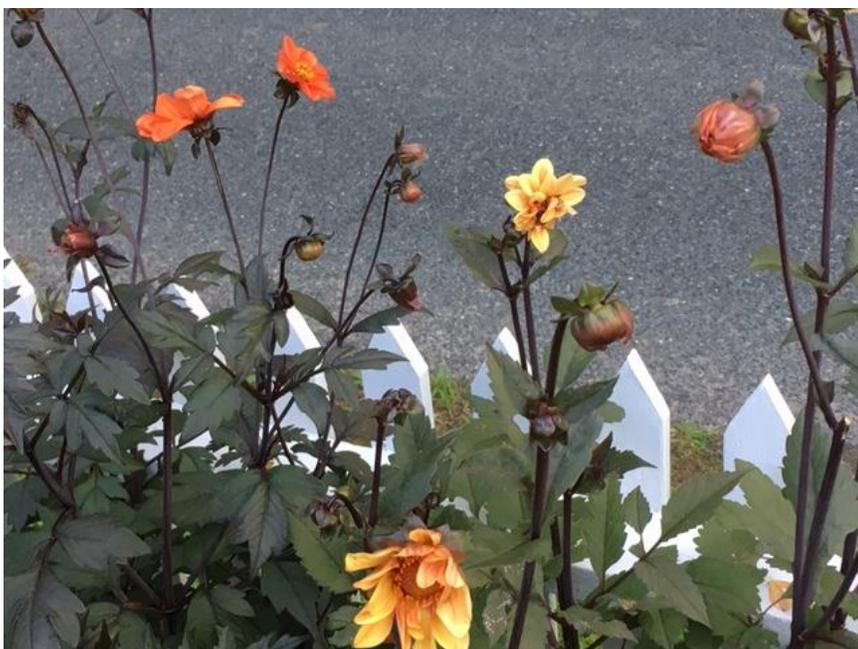
May is usually the month to plant dahlias in the garden. Enthusiastic dahlia fans may want to start the tuberous roots in pots in early April but they can't be set out until after the last frost date so I don't find you are gaining that much by starting them inside. Those planted in May usually start blooming in mid-July. That works for many of us gardeners as our June gardens are filled with the likes of peonies, irises, early phlox species and geraniums. As the days heat up, we are looking to continue the color.

Dahlias flower the most when they receive a minimum of 6 hours of sun each day. Soils should be well-drained and have a pH between 6 and 7. They do not tolerate poorly drained sites. Do not overfertilize or plants may produce lots of leaves and smaller flowers. Follow the recommendations on your soil test report or without a soil test add about a handful of a general all-purpose organic or chemical fertilizer to the soil when planting the tuberous roots. Another handful can be lightly worked in around the plants in June or July.

Soils can be lightly mulched to retain moisture but I find that heavy mulching encourages Asiatic garden beetles that devour the young shoots as they are emerging. This is purely anecdotal but I don't have any of these beetles in garden beds where dahlias are growing and I do not mulch. Slugs also like dahlias as do earwigs but usually the damage is isolated.

Deadhead spent blooms so that plants can put their energy into making new flowers and not seeds. Speaking of which, there are a number of bedding dahlias that can be started from seed and will bloom the first year. They are often available in 4-packs at local garden centers, are on the short side and great for bedding, window boxes or containers. Since they will grow tuberous roots during the growing season, they can be dug up and stored over the winter for replanting next spring.

If it is big flowers that you are after, you would need to disbud your plants. This technique simply involves removing the 2 smaller buds that are forming on either side of the main flower bud. For me and for pollinators, the more flowers, the merrier so I just let all buds develop into flowers.



Elise and Bishop of Orange dahlias image by Dawn Pettinelli, UConn.

Aside from continuous bloom from mid-July until hit by heavy frosts, the second best thing about dahlias is their colors and variety of shapes. You can find dahlias with flowers from 2 to 15 inches across in almost every color but black and true blue. They can be single, double, semi-double, resemble anemones, peonies, waterlilies and more. There are 18 official flower forms according to the American Dahlia Society along with more than 60,000 named varieties. Those particularly interested in dahlias might want to connect with the [Connecticut Dahlia Society](#).

Dahlias have so much to offer and, compared to many annual plants, are relatively carefree. Give them some sun, a little fertilizer and water and they will reward you with up to 5 months of amazing blooms. For questions on growing dahlias or on other home and gardening topics, call the UConn Home & Garden Education Center, toll-free, at (877) 486-6271, check out our [website](#) at or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.