



Dazzling Dahlias

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When I was younger, I never truly appreciated these plants. I wondered why someone would want to plant something in the spring, and then dig it back up in the fall. Why not simply do half the work and plant a perennial in the springtime and be done with it! Although my wife had a passing interest in them years ago, we never really gave them much time or attention. In the recent past, an elderly gardener friend gave my wife a dahlia bouquet. We were very impressed with the quality and beauty of her flowers, and I asked about them. Our friend started to talk about how her mother used to plant them and she is continuing with the same plants - now my interest was piqued! These plants have an almost heirloom like quality to them. No wonder people dig them up each fall!

Dahlias like rich, fertile, well-drained soil in full sun. They are prone to rot so if you have soggy or wet soil, either amend it or build a raised bed. These are one of the best plants to “see” the quality of your soil. If you want big, beautiful, profusely flowering plants, make sure that you get a soil test. Once you know the parameters, you can fertilize with a balanced fertilizer (1-1-1 ratio) or even some vegetable-type fertilizers with a 1-2-2 ratio. I have had really good results using a bulb-type fertilizer for ours (3-5-3). The key is to know what your soil *needs* before picking a fertilizer ratio. Tune your soil parameters for optimal growth and your dahlias will reward you with robust plants covered in beautiful blooms throughout the late summer and into the late fall. Once the fertilizer is down, it is a good idea to add a layer of mulch to retain moisture. Watering longer less frequently is better than shorter and more frequent watering.

Dahlias despise cool weather, and have no tolerance for frost. It is best to wait until you are absolutely sure you are past your last frost date. When you plant tomatoes, you can plant your dahlias.

There are as many styles and colors as there are words in the dictionary. If you only have pots, there are some that will work fine in that setting. If you want towering giants, they make those too! Before you purchase your plants, make sure you read the packaging to see if they are compatible with your garden plans. The tall ones will need to be staked. There is nothing worse

than an occasional severe storm breaking the stems overflowing with flower buds. The roots will survive until the following year, but you will lose a significant amount of this year's blossoms.

When digging up tubers in the fall, timing is everything. It is real easy to know when because one day a frost will hit and your gorgeous plants will go from lush and green to black and dead. Gently dig them up to avoid damaging the tubers and the eyes (area where new growth takes place where the above ground stem connects to the underground tubers). You want to be careful not to break off either. Give them a day or two to dry off – do not put them away wet. You can store them in a cool garage or basement where it does not freeze. Store them in vermiculite, peat moss, or saw dust in a cardboard or wooden box. Avoid storage in plastic bags which can harbor moisture and cause rot. Check them throughout the winter for desiccation and occasionally give the tubers a spray of water to keep them from shriveling.

One last word of advice – attach the labels to the tubers as you pull them out of the ground. It is so easy to have it all straight in your head and then get messed up when putting them away. Before planting in the spring is the best time to divide them, but make sure that each cutting has a piece of old stem with a tuber and an eye (bud). It is best to divide them to prevent a large clump. Some gardeners prefer to pot them up inside to give them a head start. We have grown beautiful plants from seemingly dry tubers purchased in the spring at our favorite nurseries. Do yourself a favor this spring and try some dahlias, but be careful...it is addicting!

For your gardening questions, feel free to contact us, toll-free, at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit our website at www.ladybug.uconn.edu or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.

