

# Growing and Caring for Dahlias

**University of Idaho**  
Extension  
Kootenai County  
1250 W Ironwood, Ste 107  
Coeur d'Alene, ID 83814



Phone: (208) 292-2525  
Plant Clinic: (208) 292-1377  
E-mail: [kootenaimg@uidaho.edu](mailto:kootenaimg@uidaho.edu)  
Web: [uidaho.edu/kootenai](http://uidaho.edu/kootenai)

**IDAHO**  
master  
GARDENER  
UNIVERSITY OF IDAHO  
EXTENSION KOOTENAI COUNTY

**SOIL PREPARATION:** Prepare your beds a few weeks before planting. Beds should be well drained and in an open, sunny location. Use good steer manure or a commercial 5-10-10 fertilizer and spread it over the bed, then till it in. If you have a heavier soil, work in sand or peat moss to lighten and loosen the texture of the soil for better drainage. Bone meal is ideal used at planting time. Put a small handful in the hole and work in well before planting tuber.

**PLANTING:** Dahlias need a sunny location to thrive. Ground should be warm and well drained at planting. Do not use bark dust on beds you have planted dahlias in. Bark dust does not allow the sun to warm the soil properly and tubers will not sprout as they should. Bark dust also increases soil acidity which is harmful to dahlias. Lay the tuber horizontally at a planting depth of 6" and about 18" to 24" apart, then cover. **DO NOT WATER THE TUBERS AFTER PLANTING** as the spring soil has enough moisture to promote proper growth and the spring rains will provide enough water. **NOTE: in case of extremely wet spring, you may delay planting until dryer weather prevails.** Planting times are generally April thru May for most climates, but are planted in March in warmer southern states.

**WATER:** Most areas have enough spring rains to fill water needs at first. During warmer, dryer weather and hotter climates, a deep watering once or twice weekly is necessary for established plants.

**FERTILIZING:** A high percentage potassium and phosphorous fertilizer such as 0-20-20 to 10-20-20 should be applied within 30 days of planting. Potassium and phosphorous break down slowly and will become available to your plants during peak blooming. High nitrogen fertilizers are to be avoided as they promote weak stems, small blooms, and tubers that rot easily during winter storage. **AVOID WATER SOLUBLE FERTILIZERS, FISH FERTILIZERS, AND MUSHROOM COMPOST** as they are normally high in nitrogen content. Always check the labels for nitrogen amounts when buying fertilizers for dahlias.

**PESTS:** Snails and slugs eat the tender shoots as they try to break through the ground in spring. USE SLUG BAIT to prevent these pests from eating up the tender new shoots. To control other pests a good spraying program is recommended. ORTHENE AND MALATHION work well to control most insects. SEVIN is best for earwigs and cucumber beetles. MALATHION or KELTHANE are excellent for spider mites which thrive in hot weather. Be sure to spray top and undersides of plant leaves. Most spray programs should begin before you see a problem, preferably the end of June thru August.

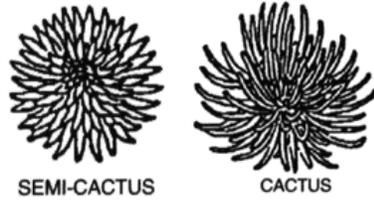
## KEY TO DAHLIA LISTING

Size codes denote the approximate size of dahlia blooms that the tuber will produce. The sizes and their codes are:

- AA Classification codes are a means to group the many varieties of dahlias that exist. You can find specific information on each of these types in the following:

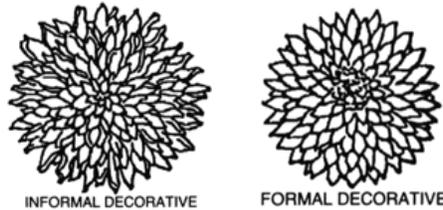
- AA: Flowers over 10" or more
- A: Flowers 8" to 10" across
- B: Flowers 6" to 8" across
- BB: Flowers 4" to 6" across
- M: Flowers up to 4" across
- P: Flowers up to 2" across

*Cactus Types*



- **IC: Incurved Cactus**- Petals rolled for their full length, with tips of the petals curving toward the center of the flower.
- **SC: Semi Cactus**- Petals flat at the base, with less than half of the petals rolled or quilled.
- **C: Straight Cactus**- Petals rolled for one-half their length, straight or nearly straight.

#### Decorative Types



- **FD: Formal Decorative**- Flat petals with an even, regular placement throughout the flowers
- **ID: Informal Decorative**- Generally flat petals, sometimes slightly rolled at the tips, but with irregular arrangement of formation.

#### Balls and Pom Pons



- **BA: Ball**- Fully double flowers, ball-shaped or slightly flattened at the face, the ray florets blunt, rounded, or indented. Involute for most of their length, fully involute for about one-half their length, and normally displayed in a spiral arrangement.
- **P: Pom Pon**- Fully double flowers almost round in shape with tightly quilled petals. Flower size 2" or less.

#### Singles, Semi Doubles, Collarettes and Anemones



- **S: Single**- Single row of flat petals surrounding a disc.
- **SD: Semi-Double**- Two or more rows of petals surrounding a disc.
- **CO: Collarette**- One row of flat or slightly cupped petals surrounding a disc. These flowers have an inner set of petaloids generally multiple and irregular forming a collar around the disc.
- **AN: Anemone**- One or more rows of petals surrounding a dense group of colored, elongated disc florets.
- **MS: Mignon Single** - single row of petals, with a flower diameter under 2".

#### Orchid & Peony

- **O: Orchid Type**- Open centered flowers with one row of ray florets surrounding a disc. The florets involute for two-thirds or more of their length. Usually partially overlapping.
- **PE: Peony type**- Open centered flowers with two or more rows of petals surrounding a disc. Petals may be irregularly formed.

#### *Waterlily*

- **WL: Waterlily**- Closed center with multiple rows of ray florets normally broad and flat or slightly incurved, depth usually less than one half the diameter.

#### *Stellar*

- **ST: Stellar**- decorative shaped flowers with petals being creased causing them to be narrow and involute with a slight recurve to the stem.

**CUTFLOWERS:** After cutting your blooms, place cut stems in 2 -3" of VERY HOT WATER (approx. 160°) and allow to cool for several hours or overnight. This will "set" the blooms and make your arrangements last for 4 to 6 days.

**DIGGING:** Dig dahlias about 2 weeks after a hard frost, the plants will turn brown when frosted hard enough. This will allow time for the tubers to "cure" under the ground before you dig. "Cured" tubers shrivel less in storage.

**TUBERS DUG BEFORE A FROST WILL BE "GREEN" AND SHRIVEL BADLY OR ROT IN WINTER STORAGE.** If your area has not had a hard frost by Mid-November, it will be safe to dig by then as the cool nights will slow down plant growth and tubers will "cure". Cut the stock off to about 6" then gently lift the tubers from the soil with a spade or pitchfork being careful not to break the necks. Wash dirt from the roots with a garden hose and allow to air dry (NOT IN DIRECT SUN) in a protected area only as long as it takes the skin surfaces to dry (usually overnight).

**STORAGE:** Pack tubers in crates, or cardboard boxes which have been lined with 9 to 10 thicknesses of newspaper. Use a storage medium of sand, peat moss, vermiculite or dry sawdust, etc. to help prevent tubers from shriveling. Never store roots in sealed plastic bags as they will rot. A cool, dry area is preferred to keep tubers in over winter (temp of 40 to 45 degrees is ideal). It is a good idea to check the tubers several times during the winter months to see how they are doing. **REMEMBER THERE ARE NO ABSOLUTE RULES TO STORING DAHLIAS.** You may experiment and find a variation of the above method that works best for your climate and stick with it.

**DIVIDING:** You can divide tubers in the fall or in the spring. If you have never divided before, spring is best as it is the easiest time to see the eyes when the new sprouts form. If eyes are difficult to see, we suggest dividing the clump in half or quarters. Not all tubers will have an eye. (See illustration). Cut surfaces should be allowed to dry thoroughly overnight before storing, or planting if spring dividing. Tuber size does not affect plant growth so even the smallest tuber will produce a full size plant if it has a live eye. Different varieties produce different size and shape tubers.

