

Year Round Gardening

GARDEN TRIVIA: What Do Tomatoes and Dahlias Have in Common?

Debra Stinton Othitis, Colorado Master Gardener

Dahlias are easy plants to grow and yield beautiful blooms from mid-summer through fall. In many respects, “dahlia culture” is similar to “tomato culture.” If you can grow tomatoes in your garden, you can successfully grow dahlias. Another similarity is that most gardeners can't grow just one. Once you grow your first dahlia, you'll want more—just like tomatoes!

There's probably no plant in the flower kingdom that gives the gardener a more spectacular reward with so little work than the dahlia. There are seemingly endless types of dahlias to keep any gardener happy, and dahlias are inexpensive. There are very few flowering plants that cost just a few dollars and provide such spectacular color, variety and abundance of blooms from mid-July through the end of the growing season. Dahlias are also very deer resistant.



Photo courtesy of Freddie Bogardus

Even though they're often called bulbs, the roots of dahlias are actually tubers that look a lot like a bunch of brown carrots. You can purchase established plants in pots, or start your own plants in pots indoors about a month before planting.

Both are convenient ways to get started, but the established plants will flower sooner. The most difficult aspect of growing Dahlias is the selection process as you must choose from a wide range of:

- Color - Nearly all colors except blue are available.
- Flower size - These range from miniatures just a few inches diameter, to the huge-flowered "dinnerplate" flowers up to twelve inches in diameter.

- Plant size – You can find dahlias ranging in height from twelve inches to seven or eight feet.

Go to <https://store.extension.iastate.edu/Product/Growing-Dahlias> for an overview of the many different varieties of dahlias. Your choice will depend on where you plan to grow them and how much space you have either in your garden beds or containers. Remember that your dahlias will require some support so drive a stake into the ground twelve inches deep and 6 inches behind the root at the time of planting. Tomato cages or a trellis are a simple alternative to using stakes to support your dahlias.

Only plant your dahlias after all danger of frost has past and ground temperature reaches 60°F. Select a planting site with good drainage and keep in mind that 6 to 8 hours of direct sunlight daily will produce the most blooms on your plants. Containers are also an increasingly popular way to grow dahlias, choose shorter border dahlias for pots. If starting your dahlia from tubers, put them in a hole several inches deep with the “eye” facing up. (The eye is the point on the crown of the tuber from which the plant grows.) If planting a number of dahlias in the same location, you should separate them by two feet to give each plant room to grow.

After planting, maintenance of your dahlias is minimal. They require little water, and in fact, excessive water can lead to rotting of the plant. A good rule of thumb is to water if the rainfall is less than one inch in seven days. Naturally, potted dahlias require more regular watering. Your plants will generally benefit from regular treatments with a water soluble or granular fertilizer. Dahlia flower size can be increased by removal of flower buds throughout the season; however, keep in mind that this practice may reduce the overall showiness of the plant.

At the end of the season after the vegetation is killed by frost, prune back the stalks to six inches. Leave the tuberous root in the ground for two weeks to harden before carefully digging them up so the tuberous roots do not break away from the clump. Dry the tuberous roots enough to shake off excess soil, pack in sawdust, perlite or vermiculite, and store them in a cool, dry place until spring when you can plant them once again. Some gardeners do not bother with over-wintering their bulbs and instead treat dahlias like annuals, purchasing new ones each spring.

When you have questions, Colorado State University Extension has research based answers. Get answers to your horticulture questions by ask.extension.org. any time day or night. Monday to Thursday from 9 a.m. – 12 p.m. you can phone 520-7684 or emailing CSUm2@elpasoco.com.

For current garden tips visit www.facebook.com/ColoradoMasterGardeners.EPC

For current classes visit elpaso.extension.colostate.edu.