

Confessions of a Lazy Gardener

Issue #6: Starting and Growing Dahlias the Lazy Way

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All of us who got to see Carlton Nelson's* garden one last time on last year's tour no doubt remember all of his beautiful dahlias. And the State Fair Dahlia Show (on Labor Day weekend in the Ag-Hort Building) is a stunning exhibit where we always see a few familiar names on exhibitors tags. Just when a lot of other things are starting to look a little tired, dahlias are just coming into their own, and can liven up the landscape in a big way. They're also great cut flowers, and one or two blooms can make a dramatic display.



Dahlias look so very exotic and tropical that many of us believe that only experts can grow them. I am here today to say that -- with all due respect to Harold Gulde* and Jerry Shannon and the other experts in the Club -- even Lazy Gardeners can grow a perfectly fine assortment of dahlias. Here are some observations on the subject:



1. Dahlias bloom later in summer and into fall. To get an early start, some people start the tubers indoors, although this is not really necessary. Place the tuber horizontally, with the eye facing up. If starting indoors, use a long, shallow container and a light potting mix or seed starting mix. I particularly like the containers that are about 3 inches wide and 6 inches long. Give them plenty of water, good drainage and good light and they should pop right up. Outdoors, plant the tuber about six inches deep, again horizontally (not vertically like a carrot would grow) with the eye facing up. Planting them this deep gives the tall plants more stability, I guess.

The main thing to know about starting dahlias -- indoors or out -- is that they need warm conditions. There is no point in starting dahlias unless the soil temperature is about 70 degrees. The tubers will just sit there and do nothing until it's warm enough. And maybe, for something to do while they're not growing, they'll rot.



2. Dahlias are good eaters, and they like soil that is rich in organic material. Last year, Margaret Hibberd's dahlias were a lot earlier and more prolific than mine, and one of the reasons was probably that she fertilized. A little bulb food in the hole when planting out is a good start. I'm going to try it this year. Watering is good, too.

3. Most dahlias are tall plants, and need to be staked for best results. It's advisable to install the stake before planting the dahlia, since putting the stake in later is risky, and one can easily impale the tuber in the process. I have used comparatively flimsy bamboo stakes for the past few years, and they seem to work fine. Carlton Nelson had 450 concrete reinforcing rods for stakes. (I'm sorry to say that Carlton does not qualify as a Lazy Gardener. Nobody raising 450 dahlias in a year that he's "cutting back" can hope to join the ranks of the Lazy.)

I have read that some people don't stake, but rather grow their dahlias up through the smaller round tomato cages. Seems like it should work, but I haven't tried it. I have stakes, and I don't have cages. Too lazy to get cages.

4. Not all dahlias are tall plants that need staking, however. There are several cultivars on the market that grow only 2 feet tall or so and do fine on their own. The most well-known of these is probably 'Park Princess', which has a nice 4-5 inch pink cactus bloom. Another one that I've had for a couple years is 'Fascination', which has dark red foliage and a striking magenta bloom with a yellow center. (I really like things with unusual foliage, which can make an impact in the garden even when there are no flowers.) I'm trying several more dwarf varieties this year, having cleaned out my checkbook on an order from Swan Island Dahlias, and I will report results sometime in the future.

5. Dahlias need light, but they do not need to be in full sun for 12 hours/day. Six hours of sun seems to be enough, especially if they are sheltered from sun during the hottest part of the day.

6. For show-quality flowers, you need to do some disbudding. 'Disbudding' means removing the two side buds and allowing the central main flower bud to reach its greatest potential. By disbudding, you get fewer flowers, but the ones you get are the best that they can be. Side buds should be pinched out as early as possible, but not so early that you mangle the central bud. I generally disbud for a while -- mainly to get good specimens for the FFF and State Fair shows, then let the rest go in order to have scads of smaller flowers up until the first frost.

7. Watch for grasshoppers. Dahlias don't seem to have too many pests. An occasional slug maybe. But their bloom time coincides with grasshopper season, and one grasshopper can really do a number on a dahlia bloom. If you find a grasshopper on your dahlia, shoo it off to the neighbor's yard. Chances are, your neighbor has more tasty things in his/her yard, and the grasshopper will be grateful.

So, go for it. Try a couple of dahlias and see if they work for you. And if you like them well enough, stay tuned this fall for a refresher course on digging and storing dahlia tubers. Summer is almost here!

