

Confessions of a Lazy Gardener

Issue #11: Digging and Storing Dahlias

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Well, after that miserable hot dry summer and fall, my dahlias look absolutely awful. If I didn't know what they're capable of looking like, I wouldn't even start writing about overwinter storage of tubers — I wouldn't even grow them again! But, the weather is a little cooler, and we had some late summer blooms, before the frost, so I think I'll dig and store my dahlia tubers again this year..

When it comes to keeping dahlias over the winter, there are three basic approaches, and variations from there.

Approach Number One: Don't do it. At all. Most Lazy Gardeners adopt Approach Number One. Treat dahlias as showy, moderately expensive annuals. This is definitely the laziest way to go, and has some distinct advantages. It has the fewest steps. It also allows you to try out a few new dahlias every year without having to dig up more lawn to make space for them. And it prevents you from being tempted to save even substandard tubers out of motives of thrift and economy.

If you select Approach Number One, you can stop reading now and move on to a more interesting post.

Approach Number Two: Hang out with people who use Approach Number Three (below). They will often end up with extra tubers that they will need to give away in the spring. Sometimes they will even pot them up and start them for you in the spring. You can't be choosy about varieties, but the price is right.

If you select Approach Number Two, you can stop reading now and move on to a more interesting post.

Approach Number Three: Do it. See details below.

The most important factor in successful dahlia storage is temperature. They store best at temperatures between 40 and 45 degrees during storage, but they cannot ever freeze. If you don't have a place where you can store them at these temperatures, the likelihood of keeping them over the winter is lower, though I know of people who have had success storing dahlias in the coolest part of their basement. Some people have space in a refrigerator. Past member Russ Smith had an insulated cupboard in his garage. Margaret Hibberd has a cousin with an unheated crawl space. Other people actually have root cellars, which seems almost like cheating. I have had reasonable success with a styrofoam fish box in my tuck-under garage, which effectively limits the number of tubers I can keep over the winter. If you don't have a cool place to store tubers, I'd advise going to Approach Number One or Two.



OK, if you're still reading, let's get started!

Step 1. Let the dahlia foliage freeze, then cut the foliage off. If possible, wait a couple of days before digging.

Step 2. Dig the tubers carefully, and keep the plant label with the tuber. Tubers have a distressing tendency to all look alike, and once you lose track of which is which, it's all over! Avoid cutting into tubers if possible. You should be doing this on a day when the temperature is above freezing, needless to say.

Step 3. Wash the dirt off the tubers with a hose. Some people are very diligent about getting all the dirt off, then cleaning the tubers in a 10% bleach solution to kill bacteria and fungus. This is commendable, but doesn't exactly fit the Lazy Gardener model.

Let the tubers dry out and kind of harden up for a couple of days in a frost-free location, like the garage. Newly-dug tubers can have kind of a tender skin, and they hold up better if they are allowed to toughen up a little bit. But don't leave them for too long, because they will get overly dry. They need some moisture to survive the winter.

Step 4. Develop a plan to keep track of the dahlia name. Many people just write the variety name on the individual tubers with a waterproof marking pen. Commercial growers have stamps made up for each variety, but this is probably overkill for a Lazy Gardener. I have had reasonable success working on one set of tubers at a time, and marking the bag they're stored in. There is no best plan, but there needs to be a plan.

Step 5. Carefully cut the individual tubers away from the main stem. It is CRUCIAL that every tuber have an eye, or bud. The eyes are located at the end of the tuber closest to the stem. If you don't get an eye, throw the tuber away, because it is not going to grow. If you're not sure if you got an eye, you can keep it to see what happens in the spring. If possible, let the cut ends of the tubers dry for an hour or so before storage. You will probably have way too many tubers than you can possibly use. You should consider sorting through the individual tubers and selecting a few of the best-looking ones, and discarding the smaller and weaker-looking tubers. Unless you have unlimited storage space or are seriously into increasing your dahlia stock.

Step 6. Pack tubers. I have studied at the feet of a couple of masters (Carleton Nelson and Harold Gulde, rest their souls) when it comes to tuber packing for storage. I saw no other sign of Carleton or Harold being Lazy Gardeners, but their technique for tuber storage is so elegant and simple that it almost makes one wonder if they had hidden Lazy tendencies somewhere.

- Basically, the individual tubers are stored in plastic bags. I like the long tubular bags that newspapers come in.
- Put one tuber at the bottom of the bag, fold it over a couple times to that the tuber is isolated, then put another tuber in, fold over a couple more times, and repeat until there isn't any more room.
- Then store that bag, and other bags with tubers of the same variety, in a paper bag labeled with the variety name. This has gotten me about 60% survival, which is about as good as it gets.



(It should be noted that there is no general consensus on THE best way to store dahlias. Many people store them in sand (heavy) or peat moss or pet bedding (unused). Margaret Hibberd stores hers in coarse vermiculite. "Dahlia Del" Hampton wraps his tubers in plastic wrap. But I have had good luck with this simple approach, and recommend it to Lazy Gardeners everywhere.)

Step 7. Pack the bags into whatever cool storage area you have and wait for spring. I keep a thermometer in my styrofoam cooler to check the temperature every once in a while.

Step 8. If your storage area starts warming up in the spring, it's probably just best to pull the tubers and pot them up to start in a warm spot. We'll talk about that in the spring.