



## The Dahlia Days of Summer

My friend Susan had never given growing dahlias a second thought until she saw them displayed in a vase at a flower show. As a floral designer, she was instantly smitten! She was impressed by the huge variety of colors, shapes and sizes including little *pompoms*, pink and white frilly petals and wow, the big *dinner plate* blooms. So many choices!!

Floral designer or not, we could all use a few fresh blooms in late summer.

To get these beautiful blooms we must plan ahead. Susan planted hers in a raised bed, well-amended with compost, in the sunniest part of her yard - exactly the fertile, well-drained soil in sun that they like. Dahlias also prefer a pH-neutral environment, so adding a small quantity of lime will help treat our usually acidic northwest soil.

Once the dahlia bed is prepared, wait to plant until the soil warms up, which is usually in mid-April through May. In extremely wet and cold springs like this last one, it is possible to start your dahlias in pots under strong grow lights.

Plant your dahlia tubers about six inches deep, placing them horizontally. Put a stake in at this time as well. Add bone or alfalfa meal to the planting hole and cover partway. Gradually fill in as the plant grows. Be sure to bait for slugs! Do NOT water your dahlias in because we normally get enough rain for dahlias until July. Once they are up and growing in the summer, they need a good deep soak about once a week as the buds form. Dahlias can be fertilized with a *bloom booster* type of fertilizer. Avoid high nitrogen fertilizers; your fertilizer should have a low first number (for example, 5-10-10).

To get a nice bushy plant with lots of flowers, pinch out the growing tip when plants are about a foot high and have three to four sets of leaves. If bigger flowers are desired pinch out the side buds as they grow.

Beautiful as they are in the garden, dahlias show off best in a vase. For bouquet advice I turn to my friend Susan, the expert floral designer. "First, cut your dahlias in the morning when they have the highest water content. Use a very clean vase and cool water with a solution of floral preservative added. Re-cut stems at an angle before arranging. Changing the water every few days and keeping your arrangement out of direct sunlight will keep it fresher. Let the dahlias be the stars in your bouquet. Use simple greens such as salal or evergreen huckleberry as background, and soft and feathery flowers such as astilbe as filler. The small and medium-size dahlia flowers work best in bouquets and the big *dinner plate* types can be featured floating in a clear glass bowl with perhaps some rocks in the bottom. Gorgeous!"

Dahlias will die back with the first frost. Cut them back to within six to eight inches of the ground when they do. Leave them in the ground to *cure* for a few weeks, then use one of our beautiful fall days to carefully dig them out of the ground. Remove any damaged tubers and wash the rest. Tubers may be soaked in a bleach solution (two tablespoons of bleach in one gallon of water) for five to ten minutes to prevent mold in storage. Store them in damp sawdust or vermiculite in a frost-free but cool area.

You can divide your dahlias in the fall or in the spring, but it is easier to see the growth buds in the spring. Use a sharp knife to separate each tuber from the main stalk but make sure each tuber has an *eye* (growth bud). The *eyes* will be at the end of the tuber just before it connects to the main stem.

Sometimes dahlias left in the ground will come back year to year (barring hard frosts or hungry squirrels), but don't take the chance. These special beauties deserve extra care!

In November, think of the beautiful bouquet that graced your table for that hot August barbeque and begin planning, digging, and dividing those dahlias.