

# Dahlias: plant with optimism for a long summer ahead

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**A** garden should flower the whole summer long. Currently, you will see a great array of dahlia tubers in garden centres. These plants deliver flowering longevity. Whatever colour you fancy, there's a dahlia to provide it.

Dahlias are some of the easiest plants to grow. From dinner plate, to pompon, to single flower, there is one for everyone. Keep them fed and watered and you can't go wrong.

If you have ordered them from a nursery, your dahlia should be arriving now. You can pot them up into large pots and keep them under protection, or you can just unpack them and keep them in a cardboard box with shredded paper until you are ready to plant them out into the garden. Be sure the threat of frost has passed.

To achieve the best impact, place them in the sunniest position available. Forget about shady spots, the dahlia isn't a shrinking violet. Dinner plate varieties such as 'Penhill Water Melon' or 'Park Princess' can be placed at the back of a border, pompons can be planted mid border and single varieties like 'Bishop of Llandaff' look great to the front.

What is the secret to getting dahlias to flower really well? Food! Over winter, mulch the intended border with well-rotted manure. This will reduce water loss and feed the soil, which makes for beautiful flowers.

If you don't have access to manure, then use slow release fertiliser and mulch with composted bark, again to reduce water loss. Keep irrigated during dry spells and if you feel that they need a nutritional boost during the growing season, supply tomato food, which is good for any flowering plant.

Once flowering has begun, think about your dead heading technique. Dead heading means taking the spent flower off the top of the stem to encourage new flowers to grow.

Do this weekly and you should have continuous flowers right into late autumn. Dahlias make great cut flowers and last a long time indoors.

To increase your supply of dahlias, take softwood cuttings in early summer, as soon as the green shoots



Dahlia 'Bora Bora' and 'Bishop of Llandaff' sharing a late summer border with *Rudbeckia deamii*.

appear and have produced enough growth for you to do so.

Use a very sandy mix and the cuttings will root within two to three weeks. If you can, provide a little bottom heat to encourage root formation.

Once the season has ended, you can either dig up the tuber or leave it in the ground to die back naturally. If you are living in an area where rain and soil are heavy, choose the first option.

Do this when the first frost has knocked back the foliage. Lift the tuber, turn it upside down and let it dry out completely. Remove any soil and leave the tubers in a dry compost,

wood chips or shredded paper over winter.

Dahlias are invaluable for border interest in late summer/early autumn, or even into late autumn if the weather allows. Consider varieties such as the beautiful single red 'Bishop of Llandaff' or 'Wishes n' Dreams' which is pink.

For pompon types, 'Sweet Suzanne' is a lovely peach colour and for a decorative dahlia, a spectacular one is the giant 'Café Au Lait Rose'. If you want the massive dinner plate flower heads, then you can't do better than 'Bora Bora' which is a semi cactus variety in a fiery orange red.