

How to grow dahlias from cuttings

The season ends: frost starts to take the dahlias in October/November. Time to start cutting down to about 15cm and start digging!



The end of the season: tuber lifted before being dried for storage. This tuber is likely to be more than one season old, because of its size and the fact that it has more than one main stem. A tuber from a first-year cutting may grow to a fair size, but is likely to be smaller than this and have only one stem. Although a large tuber, this is actually a miniature flowered variety, so size of flower is not always a guide to the size of the tuber!

Tubers are shown being dried in a greenhouse: the tops are then trimmed down a closer to the crown, removing any remaining soil, and any small fibrous roots. They can then be stored more easily. There are many storage techniques, but these tubers (above) have not been washed and are simply stored in large crates when dry. They are often turned upside down to drain.



After drying, tubers are often stored in crates: they are kept in a dry & frost-free dark place. They need to be checked if possible, to take out any that show signs of rotting, but otherwise left alone until they are brought out in the spring.

If you want to simply replant them in the garden or in pots to enjoy a display, then that is all you need to do. But if you are looking to increase the number of plants you either need to divide the tuber or to take cuttings.

Those wanting to exhibit dahlias will have carefully selected which plants they wish to increase by selecting them at the end of the previous season. They will take cuttings from those selected tubers to make 'clones' of their prize-winning plants!

Starting again for the new season: tubers are placed on compost in a tray. Note how the tubers have been trimmed down compared with the tubers as lifted at the top of the page.

The tubers then have compost put around them, so that the crown is not completely covered. This will lessen the chances of the crown rotting when moisture applied.

Tubers are then set up on the bench in greenhouse/shed. Some people start them early (Jan/Feb) with bottom heat. Other growers start a little later, when the weather is warmer and when they start shooting naturally.



A few weeks later: dahlia tubers have starting to produce cuttings material. This photo also shows some old tuber stems with disease, which really should be trimmed and removed!

Cuttings can be taken with a sharp blade. Note that the first batch of cuttings often contains large hollow shoots which are more difficult to root. Some people discard these, and wait for the second batch to develop before taking cuttings. There are many different techniques for taking successful cuttings. Some people take a bit of the 'growing eye' with the cutting, but that means the tuber is less likely to shoot again from that spot (depends how low the cut is). Taking the cutting a little higher will mean that further shoots will emerge for later cuttings. Ideally cutting from most plants need to be trimmed just below a leaf joint, and any excess foliage removed.



Cuttings are seen here in a temperature & light controlled propagator (in this case a Geopod) - they can be kept moist by misting. There are a variety of different methods used and types of propagator, so there is no single 'right' way to do things! An equally successful technique used by many is to root cuttings on a heated sand bed, with a fleece or similar above them to keep moisture in and direct sunlight out.

They can be placed in pots, trays or cells. The cuttings medium needs to be well drained. Many people use a mix of sand, vermiculite, perlite and multipurpose compost. Some find that using just builder's sharp sand is best, with nothing else

added. Some use rooting compound, but others don't! Rooting hydroponically is also becoming popular.

Also note the three small pots to the bottom left of the photo. These are small 'pot tubers' grown the previous season specifically for producing cuttings material. These are dahlias that have been grown in small pots in the previous season to produce small compact tubers. They are easy to store and easy to set up the next season.



Cuttings being potted up a few weeks later. A sign that the cutting is successful will be the tip growing and a gentle tug will reveal that it has roots. They will be delicate when removed from the propagator, so it may be best to let them stabilise for a day or two before potting up. The amount of time taken to root will depend on the time of the year & equipment used. By about April, it often only takes a couple of weeks for them to root.

Recently potted up & labelled plants. We try to recycle the pots each year - so this set has been used many times. These plants are safely in a heated greenhouse as it was still early in the season, but will need to be grown on and gradually hardened off before planting in May/June - again depending on local conditions. Remember, they need to be well protected from any late frosts! They may need to be potted on into larger pots before planting out.

