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Dahlia Talk *from tubers to blooms*

November – is for closing the garden



Over the summer I have read dozens of advice columns about storing dahlias. Most of them say, “A few days after a killing frost, cut down the plants.” In fact, you need not wait that long. Dahlias will have formed mature tubers after they have been in the ground for 120 days. The challenge of working after frost is that you may be digging in cold and challenging conditions. (Photo left, Jessica Becker)

A second item of garden lore is that if you leave the clumps buried after frost, you will be able to see the eyes, and division is easier. This is partially true. On some clumps, eyes will develop, but on others, they will not be apparent.

For years I did not have the time to be selective when dividing my tubers. I would cut, divide and store the tubers when I had time. It is important to make sure that each division had a tuber and a piece of the base of the stalk. Place them in plastic bags with vermiculite. Open the bag if condensation appears above the vermiculite. In the Spring, some divisions would sprout, and others would not. Storing the latter during the winter was not a big problem because I did not grow in the hundreds.

Barren soil is never good and nature does her best to avoid it. So help her out by preparing your garden for the winter. Remove debris but be sure to compost for future use. Then add already composted material if available, and you know all those leaves you just raked up? Chop them up a bit and put them on the garden. All this organic material insulates the soil from wide temperature swings which the microbial life appreciates, and it helps inhibit the spring weeds.

Save the minerals and fertilizer for the spring when the soil begins to warm up.

If you still have enough growing season to get a cover crop started, maybe give it a try instead of the above compost/leaves.

Another idea – if your stakes can make it through winter, leave them in the garden. You may be wondering how you will rototill in the spring if you do this...many dahlia growers no longer till their gardens. Those microbes mentioned above will thank you twice.

For big and small patches, I advise you to be vigilant about virus. Check your plants throughout the season for signs of virus. My mantra is, when in doubt, toss it out. Mildew on the other hand, is often seen in dahlias, but it is not a reason to discard the plant.



If you name plants with tags, make sure they are accurate. Find a picture on the internet or the ADS website and match it to the bloom.

I know some folks who grow the same cultivars year after year. They will not run out of space. Extras will go to friends, a local dahlia society, or into the mulch pile.

If you like to add new dahlias each year, you will run out of space! Which varieties to keep? My own preference is for the ones I like. I visited my garden after being away for months, and I first reacted to color. Vigorous growth and a bright color tell me it is a keeper.

Some have mixed form and will not exhibit well, but I am growing for myself, rather than for ribbons. Then again, I have friends that will only grow what will win in shows. To each his/her own.



Seedpods

Frost will come and the dahlia season will end soon enough. The blooms sense this and open their centers for pollination. Dahlias do not rely solely on their tubers for survival. They create seed that will spread their genomes. Nature is miraculous.

If you have never grown from seeds – let some plants go to seed, save the seeds, and try growing them in the spring. It is fun and a whole new perspective on dahlias. More about this in the spring.

Some random thoughts to end the season . . .

Dahlias strive to be anonymous. We posted a photo of a bloom this year, and even with your help, it remains unidentified. That is the nature of our plant. There are no markings on the hills of Mexico. Tags regularly get lost in the garden, and ink of every kind can fade or wash off. Even the offspring - our favorite cultivars - have a maze of chromosomes that hide ancestry. Some day like the TV program "Finding your Roots", science will give us better clues. Until then, they leave a trail of crumbs. Does the name really make a difference?

Happy Thanksgiving for the nameless blooms,

Harry Risetto

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