



Make your mark!

By Martin Král

In my youth, my Opa – a master butcher and livestock trader - impressed me with his energetic, loud (and very traditional) handshake that concluded every successful transaction. When he needed it in writing, out came his ink pencil. He then wetted the tip on his tongue as he wrote the receipt. Those ink pencils were in common use before ballpoint pens became popular in the 1950s. These pencils did leave an indelible impression, not only on paper, but also so vividly in my memories.

Dahlia lovers that mourn the disappearance of ink pencils (generally called No-Blot 705 pencils) with which they permanently marked moist tubers guessed correctly that these useful marking pencils were withdrawn from the market for a good reason. Indeed, there was: such pencils contained a lead core composed of graphite, clay, and aniline dye, which gave a mark

this purple impression. That latter component is highly toxic, and extensive use may result in the user experiencing eczema, necrosis, and even cancers.



So whether you still use those “A Bottle of Ink in a Pencil” markers or search for an alternative, don’t touch them to your tongue and do wash your hands. Produced by a variety of European pencil manufacturers, including Eberhard Faber, Sanford, Castell, and Koh-I-Noor Hardtmuth, they are now difficult to find. On Ebay, plan to pay \$30 for a single treasured pencil! Swan Island Dahlias does sell a usable ink pencil bearing no manufacturer’s name. Currently it is available for \$3 apiece, but only in red or green lead; black is sold out but may be offered again in the future.

Others have suggested tattoo pens, copy pencils, and laundry or lumber markers. Since I still have a few 705s around, I feel no need to switch from an effective (but toxic) relationship with my tuber marking pen. It did make me consider alternatives, as my supply dwindled. We hear that other growers use blunt felt tip markers on dry tuber skin with success, but for labels we can recommend specific Sharpie pens — not just any Sharpie, but the Sharpie Super Permanent, the Extreme Permanent, and the Industrial Permanent markers. These will not fade. Klein Tools “Skribes” markers also have been praised for their ability to write on irregular surfaces, but their chisel tip version probably prevents writing anything but a number on tubers.



My local nursery also sells the Milwaukee Garden Marker, but at an inflated price as I found. Well, the marker works fine on smooth plastic labels but is not recommended for tuber marking ID. For writing on labels, there is no better tool than an old-fashioned [China marker](#), often called a grease pencil. It's cheap, writes permanently on a label, and the blacks do not fade in sunlight for many years.

With my diminishing supply of ink pencils, I cast around for another method to mark my tubers. For years I have used a system of 250 numbers to mark each variety as the clump (with label attached) is washed. Once dried, I now mark each tuber with a 3-band numbering stamper using indelible ink. We'll see if this is no more time-consuming than my erstwhile approach with just an ink pencil. Plus, I may be able to keep my perilous collection of ink pencils around until the Grim Reaper calls me home.



On a side note, congratulations to the Boleys, winners of the 2025 Stanley Johnson Medal, and to Annie Walker, winner of the 2025 Les Connell medal. Here is the [link to a short video](#) highlighting the winners. Also, take a look at the American Dahlia Society's medal winning top [new introductions](#), as selected by certified dahlia judges. Derrill Hart Medal winners were scored in trial gardens across North America, Lynn Dudley Medal winners scored highest in "bench evaluation" judging at dahlia shows. One Evie Gullikson Medal winner is chosen from both trial garden entries and one is chosen from bench evaluation entries.



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