



DAHLIA TALK

FROM TUBERS TO BLOOMS



By Dianne Reitan

Sounds like the name of a band, doesn't it - Allie and the Cow Pots! Okay, maybe my hearing impairment and wearing two hearing aids is showing you all my lack of music knowledge but I like the way this title rings and it makes me laugh much like the Cow Pots official social media hash tag, [#theproofisinthepoo](#).

You may recall my [March Dahlia Talk](#) where I shared my goal of growing dahlias for Allie - my friend's upcoming wedding in July. Well, I have some good news and some not so good news. The good news is that in early April, I put hundreds and hundreds of sprouted dahlia tubers in these biodegradable [Cow Pots](#) and kept them in my humidity-high laundry room (yes, I have a big laundry room / pantry). By the time my team planted these pots inside the high tunnels on May 27, a lot of the sprouts had grown several inches above the soil line! I did use grow lights, combination of soil and compost and lightly watered the pots every week because the air in Colorado is dry. This is the first year I have ever 'started' my dahlias because I didn't think it was worth the extra hassle and expense. I decided that even if this experiment didn't get me the dahlias I needed for Allie, at least the cow manure would be a positive addition to the soil at my flower farm.



Hundreds of Cow Pots planted May 27

So, the bad news? It's July 10, and while a lot of my dahlia plants are being pinched back ([see video](#) here on topping) because they are a foot tall, they are not going to bloom in time for the mountain wedding next weekend. Sigh. I'm glad that the dahlias are a lot further along than they normally are in mid-July, but I'm disappointed that the six weeks my husband and I had to trapeze around the Cow Pots in order to get our laundry done or fetch a jar of pasta sauce, didn't result in dahlias for this special bride.

Maybe my elevation at 7,000 feet doesn't help but I did make sure the ground was 60 degrees when we put the Cow Pots in the ground. I also made sure to water every week even though the conventional wisdom is never put water on tubers. I have found that in my high and dry climate, whether the tubers are in Cow Pots or not, they need some moisture - otherwise, I end up with many more laggards that I want. I am happy to report a much lower rate of perfectly good sprouting tubers just sitting there, never amounting to anything. In fact, of the 1,850 tubers we planted, some in Cow Pots and some directly in the ground, my third year of commercial dahlia farming will result in a 95% success rate. So, one of my biggest takeaways is yes, starting dahlias does help, but so does learning how to water the dahlia tubers depending on where one lives, rather than the instructions inside the bag or box from where the tubers were shipped.



My employee Jillian with her dad Charlie who used an auger to drill holes for the Cow Pots

Another big takeaway this planting season was using the auger drill for the first time to dig the planting holes. Yes, the drills were a big help especially since the Cow Pots were larger than the tuber itself and required a larger hole. The pots must be completely covered in soil when planted if they are to disintegrate properly throughout the season. The down side to these drills is that they get very hot when used hour after hour so having extra drills and batteries you can switch out keeps the process moving forward.

Finally, after the planting was done, we put the barley straw ON TOP of the black, weed fabric. Normally, I spread this mulch material before we put the barrier down but I learned to reverse this when I saw how the Minnesota Dahlia Society manages the Dahlia Trial Garden at the MN Landscape Arboretum. The way they do it helps to retain water and helps to keep the heat down. So at my farm at the end of this season, we will just push the straw aside as we pull up the fabric and then re-spread the straw to decompose over the winter to add more organic material to the soil. Win-win.

While we have learned a lot so far this season, we will have to wait and see if our extra efforts gets us blooms sooner than we normally do. Several times over the years, I have given Allie my first bouquet of the season for her birthday during the second week of August. This year may be no different.



My employee Maribeth and Kate (volunteer) planting Cow Pots

Note: All photos in this article were taken by @laurenbs shutterbug



Graphics by Vida Wu

[Registration is open!](#)

Plan to join us September 18 - 22, 2025!

Dahlia Talk Co-Authors
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