

DAHLIAS

Digging, Dividing, and Overwintering Guide

Practical steps for healthy tubers
from autumn digging through winter storage



Dahlia Digging, Dividing, and Overwintering Guide

This beginner-friendly guide walks you through preparing to dig dahlias, lifting and cleaning tubers, dividing, labeling, storing, and waking them for the next growing season.

By the end of this guide, you'll have a practical process for handling dahlia clumps from the first cutback through winter storage and wake-up.

Table of contents

1. [Supplies and preparation](#)
2. [Overwintering site and drainage](#)
3. [Digging dahlias](#)
4. [Washed versus unwashed tubers](#)
5. [Cleaning and dividing tubers](#)
6. [How to identify a viable division](#)
7. [Dahlia gall: what to watch for](#)
8. [Labeling tubers](#)
9. [Storage conditions](#)
10. [Storage media](#)
11. [Bringing tubers out of storage](#)
12. [FAQ](#)
13. [Seasonal workflow checklist](#)

1. Supplies and preparation

Dahlia fall supply list

- ☐ A [shovel and/or a potato fork](#) for lifting clumps
 - ☐ Clean cutting tools for cutting back stalks and trimming roots. We like needle [nose snips](#) for dividing and [short loppers](#) for cutting down stalks – use what you’ve got!
 - ☐ **Sanitization:** Household bleach for sanitization (dilute 1 part water to 9 parts bleach) or [Vikron-S](#) (1:100)
 - ☐ A [garden marker](#) - regular sharpies will fade
 - ☐ [Flaggers tape](#) affixed to stalk prior to digging (if you want to keep track of varieties)
 - ☐ Paper grocery bags, [plastic shoe containers](#), or a large aerated container
 - ☐ A storage medium such as peat moss, wood shavings from animal bedding, or vermiculite
 - ☐ Optional materials for insulating or covering the overwintering site
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2. Overwintering site and drainage

Zone 9a Maritime PNW - You can overwinter your dahlias. Rot is our biggest problem and it needs to be mitigated. If your dahlias are planted in a well draining spot - give overwintering a shot!

Watch your overwintering spots for good drainage. Standing water and soil that holds water for 4+ hours can be problematic for overwintering dahlias.

Dahlias will rot if they freeze.

Possible insulating or covering materials include:

- Leaf mulch – garden GOLD
- Old hay
- Straw
- Grass clippings
- Wool
- A tarp (a must on our farm when overwintering due to how wet it gets!)

If you have a space with good drainage, plus insulate the bed with organic matter (straw, wool, leaves etc) there’s a great chance your dahlias will survive the winter.

3. Digging dahlias

1. Cut everything back, leaving 6 inches of stalk.
2. Loosen the soil around the clump with a potato fork or shovel about 6-8 inches from the stalk. Try to get your tool underneath the clump, press the handle down to lift the soil, while grabbing the top of the stalk with your hand to pull it out.
3. Lift the clump carefully and shake off extra dirt without trying to remove every bit of soil immediately.
4. Decide whether to wash the tubers before storage. The washed and unwashed approaches each have useful benefits, described below.

Note: Make sure your clumps are dry to the touch before storage (even if you are not washing).

4. Washed versus unwashed tubers

Approach	Benefits and considerations
Unwashed	Retains protective native soil layer Unwashed clumps can also be stored, washed, dried and divided in spring.
Washed	Makes it easier to inspect the tubers, clean, and label them.

Whichever approach you choose, knock off extra dirt and make sure the tubers are dry to the touch before storage.

5. Cleaning and dividing tubers



1. Clean the tuber clump before splitting it. Remove loose dirt (this is where washing helps!) so you can see the parts of the clump clearly. Cut away dead or rotting tubers, and remove very long roots that get in the way.
2. For a giant clump: use a Sawzall or reciprocating saw, or use loppers to cut down into manageable clumps
3. Separate the clump into individual divisions, keeping the parts that have the components described in the **BEN** test below.
4. Finish cleaning the long roots from each viable tuber. The skinnier the tuber the more likely it will shrivel in storage.
5. We discard the mother tuber (the tuber planted at the beginning of the year). It will look more old and wrinkly than the rest.

6. How to identify a viable division

Use the mnemonic **BEN**: **B**ody + **E**ye + **N**eck. Every viable division needs all three parts.

Part	What to look for
Body	The tuber body, size of a AA battery or larger is ideal for storing, but we will try our luck with runts.

Eye	A sprout point where the tuber will push stems. It may appear as a dimple.
Neck	The connection between the eye and the body. It must be unbroken.

If a division is missing the body, eye, or neck, it does not meet the BEN test. Look for all three parts before setting a division aside for storage.

7. Dahlia gall: what to watch for

Crown gall appears as abnormal, knobby, or wart-like growths on the crown, stems, or tubers. Growths may begin pale and become darker and rougher with age. Leafy gall looks like a dense, distorted cluster of shoots or leaves at the tuber crown.

If you suspect gall:

- ☐ Do not plant or divide the clump.
- ☐ Remove and discard the entire plant and tuber clump in household trash. Do not compost it.
- ☐ Clean and disinfect tools, containers, and work surfaces before using them on healthy plants.
- ☐ Avoid planting in that area for 3 years or replace soil to remove bacteria.
- ☐ Inspect new tubers carefully and purchase from reputable suppliers.

Important: There is no reliable cure for crown or leafy gall. Prevention, sanitation, and prompt removal are the best protection for the rest of your dahlia collection.

Source: [UC ANR dahlia gall guidance](#).

Crown Gall - OSU Plant Clinic image, 2015.



Leafy Gall - [Dahlia Doctor](#)



8. Labeling tubers

Whether you label or not is a growers choice! Do you want to know your varieties? At minimum label your storage containers. If you just love dahlias and want to multiply them? Labeling is unnecessary.

Labeling the tuber itself? Be sure to use a garden marker - this is [our favorite](#).

9. Storage conditions

Aim for a storage temperature of 40–45°F and approximately 80% humidity. We use [hygrometers](#) that connect to our phones to monitor storage conditions, but you don't have to get that crazy.

Container	How it can be used
Paper grocery bags or cardboard boxes	The most affordable option for storing tubers. Easy to label, but can be a messier storage option if you have lots of tubers.
Plastic shoe containers	These work great season after season with one drilled air hole or lid left ajar.

Large aerated storage container	Fill it with a storage medium such as vermiculite or peat moss. Ideal to use for clumps.
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Reminder: Do not put tubers directly on concrete unless in plastic boxes. It will dry them out.

10. Storage media

Choose a medium that supports the target storage conditions without leaving the tubers too dry or too wet.

Medium	Guidance	Notes
Peat moss	Most successful on our farm. Mist it lightly if it feels dry.	While peat is natural, it is non-renewable and farming peat is harmful to the planet so we try to mitigate. We want to be honest about what has worked for us!
Wood shavings for animal bedding	This medium is often too dry for us, though it may work for you in high humidity.	A storage location with substantial concrete and this method can dry tubers fast! Ask us how we know.
Vermiculite	An ideal option: a naturally occurring mineral that will not spread virus or bacteria in storage and helps keep tubers moist.	It can be difficult to source. Best local source: All Seasons Supply in Mt Vernon, WA. Get a coarse vermiculite , not fine.

Tip: Set a reminder to check on your tubers at least once a month until you feel confident in your storage conditions. “Tuber Tuesday!”

11. Bringing tubers out of storage

We usually begin waking tubers after Valentine’s Day in February to take cuttings. This is absolutely not required.

1. To wake tubers early, place them at 60–70°F.
2. Place them in barely moist soil or vermiculite medium so they do not dry out.
3. Light is not required for wake up and only needed once the dahlia sprouts
4. Dahlias sprout at all different intervals. Some are fast and some are slow!

FAQ

What temperature should I use for winter storage?

Aim for 40–45°F with approximately 80% humidity.

Can I divide my tubers in the fall and immediately replant them to overwinter?

No. Tubers need warmth to “wake up” and send out roots to manage water. Typically our soil is not warm enough in the fall to make this happen. Likely they would rot.

Can I overwinter, dig and divide in the spring, then plant immediately?

Yes. This is what many gardeners do. If you go this route, it is best to do this closer to your last frost. You may even see sprouts at this point.

When is the easiest time to divide?

The easiest time to divide is typically when the eyes are swollen so they are easy to spot. This happens immediately after digging and in the spring once their storage conditions have warmed.

Do I have to wash my tubers before storing them?

No. Washed and unwashed approaches can both work. Whichever approach you choose,

remove extra dirt and make sure the tubers are dry to the touch before storage.

How do I know whether a tuber division is viable?

Use the BEN test: Body + Eye + Neck. A viable division needs all three parts, with an unbroken neck. Make sure you have some crown material around the eye.

What should I do if I find suspected dahlia gall?

Do not plant or divide the clump. Discard the entire plant and tuber clump in household trash, do not compost it, and clean and disinfect tools, containers, and work surfaces before using them on healthy plants.

Do I need light when waking tubers?

No. Light is not required until the dahlia sprouts.

Seasonal workflow checklist

Use this concise sequence as a reminder from preparation through February:

- ☐ Prepare supplies and sanitize tools.
- ☐ Assess drainage by filling a shovel-sized hole with water and observing how it drains.
- ☐ Cut back the dahlias and dig the clumps.
- ☐ Decide whether to wash the tubers.
- ☐ Dry the tubers and inspect them.
- ☐ Divide using BEN: Body + Eye + Neck.
- ☐ Remove rotten material and excess roots.
- ☐ Label the divisions, bags, or containers if desired.
- ☐ Pack and store at 40–45°F and approximately 80% humidity.

Safety note: Cutting tools and power tools require care. Sanitize tools and surfaces between clumps can reduce the spread of viruses and bacteria.

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