

Way to Grow

*Plant Dahlias Now to Add Dazzle to Your Garden
Summer Through Fall*

by Steve & Cathy Lambert



Of the various late summer and fall flowers, dahlias occupy a place near to our heart. Steve's grandfather, Grandpa Ted, grew hundreds of different varieties, in Connecticut where growing dahlias is much more difficult than in California. His rows of dahlias would stop traffic and fill the altar of the community church.

Here in Orinda, we don't usually have the luxury of a large flower garden like Grandpa Ted's but dahlias can be added to your landscape in many ways. One advantage Orinda has is its climate which is perfect for dahlias because we don't have to dig up the tubers every winter to protect them from freezing.

The variety of dahlia sizes and colors is enormous. They range from small pompom blooms to amazing, "dinner plate" flowers in multiple and vivid colors. Plant sizes are also varying from dwarf border dahlias to tree dahlias which can grow 10 feet or more in height. Many aficionados consider the dahlia to be the "flower of flowers."

The history of the dahlia is very interesting. Dahlias originated in Central America and are native from Mexico to Costa Rica. They were grown by the Aztecs for food, medicine and for the beauty of their blooms. Plants were taken back to Europe by Spanish explorers more than 200 years ago. At the Botanical Gardens in Madrid, the Abbe Cavanille named the genus "Dahlia" for Andreas Dahl, a noted Swedish botanist and student of Carl Linnaeus.

There are currently 35 recognized species of dahlias. Because the dahlia is easily hybridized (cross pollinated), it was easy for hybridizers' as well as home gardeners (including Grandpa Ted) to create new varieties. So the evolution of the original simple blooms to a vast range of single and double-flowered blossoms in saturated bright colors and a multitude of shapes has been relatively easy.

During the 1800s, the popularity of dahlias surged. Thousands of varieties emerged and were documented. Dahlias were even briefly grown as a food crop for their tuber to supplement potato crops. The

following are some tips and our top picks for dazzling dahlias.

Planting: Full sun is the ideal location for most dahlias but these sun lovers prefer morning light over a hot afternoon spot. Dahlias are typically planted about the same time as your summer veggies, early spring after all danger of frost when the soil has warmed up. In Orinda that is around mid-April through May. Although you may be tempted by warm March days, our soils usually don't start warming up until sometime in April. Wait until evening temperatures are consistently above 40 degrees. Well drained, deep soil works the best.

Since Orinda soils are mostly clay, it's best to work in lots of organic matter. Dahlias are tubers that look something like a skinny sweet potato. One end of the tuber (or clump of tubers) has a bit of the old stem, which is usually where a new eye forms. Look for small sprouts on the side. When planting, lay tubers flat with the eyes pointed up in three to six inches of soil and space them 18 to 24 inches apart. Bone meal or a low nitrogen fertilizer, such as 5-10-10, can be added at planting time. Too much nitrogen can cause excessive vegetative growth and fewer blooms. Mulch your beds after planting. The shoots will take about two to four weeks to emerge.

Care: Because blooms can be large and stems thin, some dahlias need the support of a floral stake. Moisture in the spring soil is sufficient to promote growth. Don't water the tubers at planting time because this can cause them to rot. Wait until the ground warms up, usually about the time the sprout breaks through. When the weather warms up and the top growth has emerged, you can begin to water. A deep watering two times a week should be adequate. When your dahlia plants are 12 to 20 inches tall with no more than four sets of leaves, cut or pinch the center shoot. This produces shorter, bushier plants with more flowers. Remove old blossoms to promote more blooms and keeps the plant growing vigorously. Cut off the entire cane when there

are no longer any buds to encourage new canes with stronger blossoms.

In our climate it's not necessary to dig and store dahlia tubers for winter, however, it is important to divide the tuber clumps every few years. Dig tubers two weeks after the first frost or wait until the middle of November. Wash clumps and let them dry (not in hot sun) then store them in paper bags in a cool, dark, dry place. Tuber clumps can be divided before storage or just before planting in the spring.

Protect: Slugs and snails can do major damage to your dahlias. We recommend putting snail bait out at planting time then follow up with more as needed when dahlias are just appearing from the ground. Slug bait may be required around each tuber. Other pests, such as aphids or cucumber beetles can be destructive as well. Cucumber beetles look like light green lady bugs, but don't be fooled; these guys will eat huge holes in all your flowers. Organic insecticidal soaps should be applied to affected areas as soon as beetles appear to stop the spread. Diazanone and Pyrethrums can be used as a non-organic but effective method for controlling insects. Any application of insecticides should be applied early in the morning or late in the day.

Enjoy: Dahlias while gorgeous in the garden are stunning in floral arrangements too. Dahlias should be cut in the early morning or late in the afternoon when the sun is no longer directly on the plants. Place fresh cut dahlias in tepid (warm) water for about one half hour then replace it with cool tap temperature water. Add one to two pumps (depending on the size of your vase) of antibacterial soap to keep the water and flowers fresher longer. Blooms will last from three days to over a week depending on the variety. Change water frequently and avoid placing your cut flowers in a hot or sunny location. For the longest lasting flowers, pick your dahlias when they are about two thirds open.

Our top picks have long lasting blooms (both in the garden and as cut flowers) and include a variety of colors and bloom shapes: *Pineapple Lollipop*, a cheerful pale yellow bloom; *Cornel*, a deep, dark maroon; *Café o'late*, a beautiful blend of pale pink and creamed coffee brown on a strong four foot tall plant; *Garden Party*, a fiery yellow, flame shaped petal with orange highlights; *Just Married*, a cool purple to yellow blending with very skinny petals; *Bed Head*, a solid SF Giants Orange; *Lagoon*, a pure purple; *Fuchsiana*, a beauti-

ful blend of watermelon and fuchsia; and *Karma Choc*, dark maroon flowers and dark green and maroon foliage.

If you have any questions about dahlia varieties or their care, feel free to email us at office@gardenlightslandscape.com.