

Focus on Dahlias

by Sylvia Green, HPS Member and Dahliophile

DAHLIAS ARE A FAVORITE LATE SUMMER FLOWER that I have come to love and admire, despite the 2016 challenges of late frost (most peaches were lost), sporadic 2" rains in May and June, and finally the high heat of July and August. The heat seemed to be a major factor in reducing the usual development of fine-haired roots from the underground tubers. After one drenching rain, I lost five dahlias with flowers 3–4' high that just wilted. Upon inspection, some of the stems had rotted at the tuber and others exhibited sparse root growth. The Greater Philadelphia Dahlia Society (GDSS) reported that growers in Washington, DC; Philadelphia; New Jersey; and Delaware area reported sparse bloom and lack of foliar branching and root growth on underground tubers in July, August, and early September until cooler weather returned. In our area, watering recommendations on established dahlias are deep watering two to three times a week for thirty minutes with a sprinkler.

An Australian visitor suggested that Mid-Atlantic gardeners didn't have it so bad the past summer. He deals with 100° temperatures and 8+ pH—and still is a successful grower. He waters two or three times a day for only fifteen minutes. He also applies foliar fertilizer, as roots can't take up essential nutrients in high pH soil.

In Maryland, true to their good fall behavior as temperatures returned to normal in September and October, the dahlias were beautiful again.



Dahlia 'Sugartown Sunrise'



Dahlia 'Clearview Daniel'

A vote was taken asking GDSS members which dahlias they found do well in the heat. 'Clearview Daniel' won hands down. 'Spartacus', 'Edna C', 'Vasio Meggos', 'Sugartown Sunrise', and 'Kidd's Climax' also were mentioned as able to handle the heat in our climate.

The garden dahlia, *Dahlia x varabilis*, has been cultivated from species in Mexico and Guatemala. It was introduced to Spain and then Europe in the 1790s. The genus is thought to contain 27 species that grow in the wild but may have been cultivated in Aztec gardens for many hundred years before.

Dahlia growing is not difficult. For best results, dahlias should be planted from mid-April through May for most areas except hot climates. Dahlias need sun to thrive (at least eight hours), except in hot climates where afternoon shade is best. Less sun generally means taller plants and less blooms.

Test your soil prior to planting. The ground should be warm, well drained, and in an open sunny location. Add sand and peat to heavier clay soil for better drainage. The pH should be 6.5–7.0, slightly acidic. Lay the tuber horizontally 4–6" deep, 18–24" apart. **Do not water tubers after you plant them!** Wait until the sprouts have appeared above the ground. Do not use bark dust or mulch to cover the dahlias, as it will not allow soil the warmth

it needs. That is also a good time to apply snail/slug bait to protect the new sprouts.

Plant a 6–8' stake (you can purchase stakes at Home Depot) in ground at least one foot from tuber at planting time to enable you to tie up the plant as it grows. Dahlias require a low nitrogen, high potassium and phosphorous fertilizer, such as 5–10–10, 10–20–20, or 0–20–20. First applications should be within 30 days of planting and repeated approximately 3–4 weeks later. One of the biggest mistakes with dahlias is overfeeding them. Avoid compost and high nitrogen water-soluble types, as they promote weak stems, small or no blooms, and tubers that rot in storage. If spider mites and general insects are an issue in your area, recommended sprays are Orthene®, Malathion, Sevin® Dust, or Bon-Neem™. Do not use herbicides!



Dahlia 'Kidd's Climax'

To promote shorter, bushier plants with better stems for cutting, pinch or cut the center shoot just above the third set of leaves or about 18–20" tall.

For more information, visit Swan Island Dahlias (www.dahlias.com), join the Greater Philadelphia Dahlia Society (www.philadahlia.org), or peruse *The Gardener's Guide to Growing Dahlias* by Gareth Rowlands.