

## April Ask the Experts: Caring for Cuttings, Starting Tubers, and Soil Preparation

Although Spring has officially arrived on the calendar, we know that Mother Nature isn't going to make it quite that simple. We still have a bit of time before we can plant our dahlias outside, but if you've been following our column you know there's plenty to prepare before that time comes!

Last month, our experts shared their methods on how to take cuttings and encourage them to root and grow on before it's time to plant. This month, we discuss potential issues that might arise with cuttings as well as the preparations our experts are making in anticipation of planting out in May. We also ask the experts about starting dahlias from seed. You never know what you're going to get when you grow from seed and the plant that develops will be a completely unique dahlia.



Steve's trays of cuttings at 4 weeks old.

Be sure to also check out the [summary of the "Ask the Experts"](#) panel that took place at the March meeting featuring Kevin Maloney, Laura Matz and David Sales. CSDS members posed lots of good questions which were expertly fielded by our featured growers.

For this month's "**Ask the Experts**" we're once again fortunate to have some great tips from **Rusty Ritchie**, **David Sales** and **Steve Meggos**. Besides some practical tips, we also asked each expert what variety has done well for them so far this season.



**Rusty Ritchie:** My tubers kept in my crawl space better than ever. The difference this year...every load of laundry added a significant amount of moisture to the storage area. (We've been doing lots of laundry. I'm torn between repairing the plumbing or having another pond.) I've had some success with cuttings from 'Manor Jubilee', 'Bloomquist Barbara', and 'Jessica'.



**David Sales:** The variety that has been the most successful for me so far this season is 'AC Abby'. The tubers have overwintered well and are producing many sprouts.



**Steve Meggos:** I have a lot of varieties that make lots of tubers and have held up very well throughout the winter - for example 'Vassio Meggos', 'Steve Meggos', 'Louie Meggos', 'Mother's Love' and many more. I have a lot of first and second year seedlings and can't wait to grow them again this year.

*Our experts have been busy tending to trays of cuttings. Let's check in on their progress and get some tips!*

### **Last month we provided tips on taking cuttings and caring for them. What common problems may occur for growers with their cuttings and what are some suggested solutions?**

**Steve Meggos:** Always you are going to have a very small percentage of cuttings - 2 to 3% that are not going to root for one reason or another. The main reason is if the cuttings are hollow they will never root so they need to be checked. Second, if the cutting is rotting the reason is because the soil or Oasis is too wet. They should be kept moist, not wet. If the cuttings are yellowing they need more light. Also mist more often with water and fertilize.

**David Sales:** I spray my cuttings daily, but also maintain a ventilation slot in the dome covering the cuttings so the moisture doesn't build up too much. Also, I either remove or reduce the size of large leaves on the cuttings to decrease moisture loss from the leaves until the roots grow in.



**With good care, Steve's trays of cuttings are thriving at 6 weeks.**

**Rusty Ritchie:** Last year 'Camano Cloud' was a pet project. I've grown it for over ten years and I would describe it as a light pink 'Embrace'. Usually I'm lucky to have one tuber that survives. Two years ago, the only clump I had of 'Camano Cloud' was nothing but pencil-thin tubers. I kept them growing in the hoop house, and had very little success with cuttings, but the original skinny tubers that survived the winter produced very nice tubers last fall and they wintered well. They just needed a really long growing season. I have found that cuttings that fail could be as a result of too much of something or not enough. Duh. Steve mists four or five times a day. I have tried it, and I like the results. Too much moisture from below is not good. Too much light during the first few days can stress them. Not enough warmth can make them sluggish, and too much warmth cooks them. If you remember the fable about sour grapes, if you feel you've done everything right and they die, just chalk it up to: "They were probably virused anyway."

### **What preparations do you make for your beds in April in anticipation of planting out in May? Do you do any soil testing on your planting area?**

**David Sales:** I test the soil in my planting beds every other year. I send samples to A&L Great Lakes Labs. I'm now doing no-till planting, so I don't rototill the beds. There are beneficial structures and microorganisms in the soil that get disrupted with tilling. Plus it's easier!

**Steve Meggos:** The only preparation I do in April on the beds is at the end of the month. I till the ground a couple of weeks before I plant. Before I till the ground, I spread fertilizer (10-10-10) and granular sulfur. The sulfur is good for control of the soil pH plus it keeps the plants clear of powdery mildew. I never test the soil. The only thing I would test it for is pH which I like to keep between 6 to 6.5. If the pH is over 6.5 or under 6 the plants have a hard time absorbing nutrients from the soil. If it is over 6.5, I add granular sulfur to bring it down. If it is under 6, I add granular lime.

**Rusty Ritchie:** This is a great time to make amendments to your patch. I have been at the same location since 1984. I have done pH testing on my own in the past, and had a thorough analysis done about five years ago, okay, actually maybe ten. I did follow the suggestions halfway the first year and was pleased with the result, so I went with the other half the next year and saw similar results. Many oak leaves blow into my garden and I try to remove them all, but they still impact the pH, so lime is my go-to remedy if a plant seems to be unhappy. I always like to add some bonemeal to the bottom of the hole at planting time. I also use a time release fertilizer at planting, and last year I did the same about the first of July. I did like my harvest last fall, so they will probably get a double dose this year as well. I would love to add compost to the beds, but I never seem to have the gumption. I used to roto-til every year, but the last four to five years I haven't, and I haven't noticed a difference, and I guess that makes the worms happy, too. Sometimes less is more.

### **Do you start any dahlias from seed? If so, what is the source of your seed (self-collected or purchased)? Do you have any tips on successful germination? Do you treat your dahlia seedlings differently from your cuttings?**

**Steve Meggos:** I start at least 1500 dahlia seeds every year and they are my own seeds because I cross-pollinate my own plants every year. In a good year I collect up to 5000 seeds. I start my seeds straight in potting soil. I do not use the paper towel method (putting seeds in layers of damp paper towels to pre-check viability). My seeds germinate between 90 to 95%. The little plants I grow from the seeds are not treated any differently from the tubers or cuttings.

**David Sales:** I collected about 100 seeds from my plants last year and will plant about 30 to 50 that germinate. I start them on moist paper towels, and then put them in seed plugs.

**Rusty Ritchie:** I have dabbled with seedlings, but I get more pleasure from the established varieties. Since the pandemic I've done more seed starting with edible varieties. When I used to grow seedlings, I spaced them just as I spaced the rest of the garden, trying to give them a fair chance to perform before I pronounced judgment.

With the CSDS Best and Worst (seedling) contest - trust me on this - it's easier to win the worst. Ninety-five percent of dahlia seedlings should not be grown a second year. Of course, with a little luck, you might get a keeper that people will grow for generations.

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Thank you to David, Rusty and Steve for sharing their tips! Happy Spring!

*Column edited by Vida Wu. Photos provided by Steve Meggos.*