

May Ask the Experts: Is it Time to Plant?



Steve's dahlias at time of planting.

It's been a guessing game so far this dahlia season - unseasonably hot, sunny and dry weather, followed by several cold, windy and snowy days. Just the start of another strange season! All eyes are going to be on the weather forecasts in the coming weeks in anticipation of planting time. I have three weather apps on my phone and another that tracks how much rain has fallen in the last 24 hours but dahlia growers aren't weather obsessed - are they? :) I wonder how many weather apps our experts have on their phones! I'll be sure to ask them next month! This month in addition to our experts **Rusty Ritchie**, **David Sales** and **Steve Meggos** who are sharing their best tips on staking and

planting out your dahlias, Immediate Past President **Rosemarie Magura** is imparting her expertise in a related special feature below - ***Growing Dahlias in Containers***.

First let's check in with some practical tips for planting and staking dahlias and also find out how many **new** varieties our experts are growing this season.



Steve Meggos: I have been growing dahlias since 1982 and breeding since 1994. I will have 40-45 new varieties this year and all of them are second year seedlings from last year.



Rusty Ritchie: I've been growing dahlias since 1969. I've done some trading with other growers, but only two new varieties so far this year. I traded for varieties I already have to see if I have poor stock, or if I'm just a bad gardener. I'll hopefully pick up something interesting at the Elkhart Dahlia Society Spring Fling on May 6 or the Midwest Plant Auction on June 3, both events at High Dive Pavilion in Elkhart. I have a few I would like to try from this year's new ADS introductions, but I'll be patient until they become available at a club sale. I used to pick up one of anything I didn't already have at the club sale, but I am growing

about half the plants that I used to so I try to be more selective. That doesn't mean Anita has to be more selective. We still have space for anything she wants.



David Sales: I have been growing dahlias for about 25 years and have been propagating for 15 years. I have a small garden: 30 to 50 hills. I am growing five or six new varieties plus five of my successful seedlings from last year.

How do you determine when to plant your tubers outside?

Steve Meggos: To plant dahlias or any kind of flower in the ground, the temperature of the soil should be 60 to 65F, that way the plants will take off faster and better. Before you plant you have to be sure there is no more frost and the ground is nice and dry. I always start planting the week after Mother's Day (May 13).



Steve's dahlias, three weeks after planting.

David Sales: I plant only rooted cuttings, not tubers, to avoid rotting in the wet spring soil. I plant between Mother's Day and Memorial Day (May 29), as soon as the soil is dry enough to be workable. Whatever I plant has been outside for at least two weeks (often four) to be hardened.

Rusty Ritchie: Around here, if you are putting dormant tubers in the garden, it's safe to plant anytime in May, but don't expect them to grow much until the soil warms up.

If you have poor drainage and a mini-monsoon season, you should start your tubers in trays early and plant in the garden when the elements have become more civil. I'll usually aim to plant by mid-May, but a mild ten-day forecast on May first might get me started on May first. Since all of my dahlias are about a foot tall when I plant, I avoid planting on hot sunny days. Of course, I avoid doing lots of things on hot sunny days. The plants CSDS provides in early May at their sale are generally ready for planting, but if it's unseasonably warm, you might let them stay in the pots for a few days and let them have some shade if they complain. If the leaves droop, it could be too much sun. It could be thirsty. If it's both, shame on you. Most of the plants I get at the June auction are beautiful, but they are not ready to face the brutal sun during the long days of June. They may need to be pampered and protected until a good day for planting comes along. I like to let the plants grow up most of June before I top them.



Steve's dahlias at 8 weeks since planting.

What have you found to be the best method for staking dahlias?

David Sales: I stake my dahlias to rebar, one plant per bar.

Steve Meggos: For staking dahlias I use stainless steel pipes seven feet tall and 3/4 inch wide. I tie the dahlias with twine. The first time I tie the plants I make sure they are at least a foot tall. After that I tie them every 12 to 16 inches. The BB and B

type varieties I wrap around with the twine, and I tie it to the stake. The A and AAs I usually tie one or two branches alone. For the seedlings and the pot roots, because I plant them six inches apart, I use a plastic net which works really well.

Rusty Ritchie: The best exhibitors I know plant one plant to a stake. With the main stalk close to its own support, the chance of the plant blowing over is minimal. Of course, the laterals will need to be secured as they get taller, but one plant per stake is the way to go if you have enough stakes.

I grow most of my dahlias next to wire fences and secure them with string. I try to encourage laterals of the larger varieties to grow away from the fence, but for smaller varieties, they branch through the fence and require less tying.



Steve's dahlias after weeks of diligent care.

My main garden has ten fence rows. I plant on each side of the fence, so I have 20 rows. On each side I'll plant three feet apart, staggering them so every 18 inches there is a plant on the fence. All of these plants are planted in one- or two-gallon nursery pots, so the holes are about a foot deep. This lets the pots be about three inches below the surface and as plants grow, I mound more soil around the main stalk, creating a little 'hill'. So if some old-timer asks you, "How many hills are you growing?", you might know how to answer him. Everything in the main garden is protected by nursery pots whether tuber, cutting or seedling. Varmints!

What is your typical process for planting in the ground? Do you plant tubers differently from seedlings or cuttings?

Steve Meggos: Always you should plant your dahlias in a nice, well drained spot of your garden. They must have at least six hours of sun a day. I plant my dahlias between 32 to 36 inches apart - that way they have enough room between them for air flow. I plant the dahlias at least eight inches deep so they have good support. In the holes I add 10/10/10 fertilizer, granular sulfur and 3-in-1 granular systemic which has fertilizer, insect control and disease control. The application protects the plants for up to six weeks. So at the end of the sixth week, I do the second application the same as the first. I plant the tubers, the cuttings and the seedlings exactly the same way. I water the cuttings and the seedlings immediately after I plant them. The tubers I do not water until they sprout. After that I water the plants twice a week.

David Sales: I place the rooted cuttings at ground level and mound soil around them, creating a "hill". I will add one to two tablespoons of Bayer 3-in-1 fertilizer to the soil, under and around the plant. After two to three weeks, I'll mulch with two to three inches of shredded leaf compost and water as needed with drip irrigation through a soaker hose that goes along the base of the plants.

Rusty Ritchie: When I plant, adding bonemeal at the bottom of the hole is something I try to do every year. A balanced time release fertilizer with trace elements is applied around the hill, after planting. I have used pure nitrogen in the past, but I would only use it early in the season to encourage green growth.

I use a drip tape watering system and a water gauge to keep my garden happy. If you plant tubers, you let mother nature do the watering, but my plants in May already have developed root systems and need about an inch of rain every four to five days. Some years I hardly need irrigation, but it's a good way to help your garden from getting stressed during the dry periods.

Thank you to Steve, David and Rusty for sharing their knowledge. Happy planting!

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