

June Ask the Experts: Tying, Stopping, Watering and Fertilizing

Now that our dahlias are in the ground or containers and hopefully establishing themselves happily, the next stage of care usually involves tying. As a dahlia grows, its stalks need the support of stakes or cages to keep them from bending or breaking. Rebar, stainless steel pipe, plastic coated metal rods and t-posts are common staking materials. Tomato cages and corraling with posts and twine are other methods. Check out [last month's experts column for a refresher on staking](#).



Looking good! David's dahlia bed staked, labeled, and irrigated.

This month's column explores stopping, watering and fertilizing practices. Let's find out from this month's experts **Rusty Richie** and **David Sales** how they keep up with their newly planted dahlias.

This month's novelty question is about the weather. Let's find out our expert's favorite sources for keeping up with Mother Nature!



Rusty Ritchie: My favorite source for weather reports is the local news in the morning...with coffee. Most of the time, the weather is on half the time. If I can't remember what they said, Anita can find reliable local news on her phone.



David Sales: I check the weather on my iPhone and look out the window. In addition I have a special weather rock in my garden. When it's wet, then it's raining. When the rock is warm, then it's sunny. When the rock is dark, then it's nighttime. 😊

What type of string or material do you use when tying your dahlias?

David Sales: I tie the main stem and all laterals with 3-ply jute twine. For bushy small blooms, I will encircle the whole plant with twine.

Rusty Ritchie: I use orange baling twine to tie my dahlias. Twenty-thousand feet for \$20.00. It does the job and lasts forever. In a perfect world I'd use one-inch strips of old t-shirts. They don't leave marks and have some flexibility.

At what point in a dahlia's growth do you choose to top or stop?



David's dahlias - great inspiration photo of our end goal!

David Sales: I top most plants when they are about 12 inches high and have at least four sets of leaves. I don't time the topping to the date of upcoming shows, but some expert exhibitors do this.

Rusty Ritchie: I like the plants to get as tall as they want without a top bud. Once they bud, I'll remove the top. About a week later, I will decide which laterals to encourage. I'll leave three to four laterals for the dinnerplates, and up to eight for the smaller varieties. I do not time blooms for shows but delaying blooms until at least August will spare them much of the brutal heat of summer. Dahlias love fall

weather.

Larger blooms take longer to develop, so topping your plants by late June could bring you blooms in mid-August. If you want blooms to peak for the show at the botanical garden, you may delay first blooms by topping later (mid-July), and/or removing buds and laterals to keep the plant focused on what is growing and saving the first blooms for September.

I prefer to let them do what comes naturally, as long as the plants look healthy, and the buds look round and green. It's great to have blooms for the show, but more important is to have blooms in the garden.

Do you recommend removing lower leaves on the plant?

David Sales: Yes for better airflow, hindering insect damage and for better appearance in the garden. It helps reduce the incidence of powdery mildew.

Rusty Ritchie: A major rule of gardening is to remove anything ugly from the plant. Lower foliage tends to yellow and serve as a host to invasive pests that prey upon the aged. The better the ventilation, the healthier the plant, above and below the ground.

If a tuber puts out more than one stalk, do you allow them all to grow, or do you limit multiple growths in any way?

Rusty Ritchie: I prefer to have one shoot develop from the ground, because it is easier to train. Later in the season those late shoots can provide a second round of first blooms.

David Sales: I only allow one stalk per tuber.

What are your watering and fertilizing practices at this stage after the dahlias have already been planted and in the ground for about a few weeks to a month?

David Sales: By the time the plants have been in the ground for three to four weeks, they will already have been generously mulched with leaf compost. This minimizes watering. I will water only when the soil is dry. After a month I will fertilize with Miracle-Gro, but I may alter that if I get a soil analysis that year.

Rusty Ritchie: I have a drip watering system that Anita is in charge of installing. I turn it on when we need it, maybe five times last year. I have a Southtown Dahlia Society rain gauge that tells me when I should water. I use a time-release fertilizer within a week of planting, and whenever I spray for pests, I add Jack's Professional Water-Soluble Fertilizer to the mix. I don't like mixing pesticides, but a little Jack's always seems to help.

Thank you to Rusty and David for sharing their knowledge. For additional resources on topping and other related topics, check out the [American Dahlia Society's resources on grooming](#). Also, well known dahlia hybridizer Kristine Albrecht has an informative video, [85. Pinching Out Young Dahlia Plants for More Blooms](#). Wishing everyone a wonderful growing season!

Column edited by Vida Wu. Photos provided by David Sales.