

May Bonus Ask the Experts: Growing Dahlias in Containers



Rosemarie's beautiful potted dahlias.

Is it possible to grow a dahlia in a pot? Yes! Dahlias can be successfully grown in containers. There are dahlias which more naturally lend themselves to containers such as low-growing border dahlias which can range from 15 to 20 inches in height, but even very tall varieties can be grown in containers if the container is large enough and the plant can be securely staked in the pot.

You may wonder why a person would want to grow dahlias in containers. Well, you might like to have dahlias on your patio or deck and have the flexibility of moving them. Or perhaps you've run out of space in your flower beds. Containers also give you a way to have more control over poor soil conditions and light requirements or provide protection from voles or other animals who may find your prized tubers tasty. Also, being able to move your containers could extend your growing season if an early frost occurs. Pots can be moved into a garage and then brought out again when conditions pass. I personally have overwintered tubers in their pots

by bringing them into an unheated garage that does

not typically dip below freezing temperatures. I water them sparingly over the winter and then when it stays above 50F, I'll bring them outside and start to wake them up.

Some breeders use pots as small as four inches buried in the ground when growing new varieties from seed. If the dahlia that results does not make the cut, it's easier to cull the undesired plant by pulling the entire pot and plant out of the ground.

Now that we've shared that it is possible to grow dahlias in containers, as a special feature to our "Ask the Experts" column we are fortunate to have Rosemarie Magura, who served as CSDS President from 2021 to 2022, as our guest expert on the subject. She never grew dahlias until she joined CSDS in 2015. Rosemarie says several members told her she could not grow dahlias in containers, but as a newcomer to dahlias, she did not have any experience to know what was possible or not. With Jim Kassner's urging, she entered the CSDS Dahlia Show in 2016, and won Best in Show in the Novice section with the dahlia 'Nick Sr.' - which she successfully grew in a half-barrel! Here are the questions we posed to Rosemarie.

What is the minimum size container you should consider for planting a single tuber?

A 16 x 16-inch container would be the smallest pot I would use. Half barrels are the best for all types of dahlias. (A half barrel measures 15.5 gallons, and it usually measures 16 inches in diameter and 23 inches tall.) They also have cloth bags with handles for moving the bag around. I have a friend that only uses cloth bags, and he grows fantastic dahlias.

What is your initial process of planting into a pot?

I first grow the tuber in a pot with a soilless mix. My containers have soil, Moo fertilizer and peat moss in them. I bury the tuber about 2 inches below the surface. In the hole, around the tuber, I put Osmocote fertilizer, bone meal and worm castings. I stake with the metal rods covered in plastic, unless it's an AA. For an AA size dahlia, I use a metal rebar.

What are the different considerations you should take into account when planting into a container versus planting in the ground?

You have to water containers more often. I suggest buying a moisture meter. Many times, the soil is wet, but the top is dry. I fertilize the pots once a week. I rotate each week using either Miracle Gro or fish emulsion. I am an organic gardener, so I do not use harsh chemicals on my plants.

At the end of the season, if you elected to, could you leave the tubers in the pot to store for winter?

I dig my tubers up because it is too cold in Illinois to leave the tubers in the ground. They will freeze.

I use the Saran method of wrapping my tubers. I store the wrapped tubers in Styrofoam boxes, with layers of newspapers between my tubers, in my unheated garage, on a top shelf that has a wall attached to my house.

Rosemarie says she's learned a lot from presentations by CSDS members and other dahlia groups. She also recommends checking out resources from the American Dahlia Society (ADS) as well as books on growing dahlias. A gardening book she just read and highly recommends is *Teaming with Microbes* by Jeff Lowenfels and Wayne Lewis. A big thanks to Rosemarie for being our guest expert this month!

Photo provided by Rosemarie Magura.