

THOUGHTS ON DIGGING AND DIVIDING

By Ted Kennedy

One of the great advantages of dahlias is that they have tubers and that the plants grown from those tubers will be just the same every year. One of the disadvantages of dahlias is that dahlias do best when dug and divided each year. I am writing this short article to touch on the basics of digging and dividing dahlia clumps.

The first question that most beginners ask is: "When should I dig my dahlias?"

There is a lot of misinformation on this topic and the biggest myth is that you should dig your dahlias after a killing frost. Dahlias can be dug and stored successfully in our area any time after October 1st which is usually many weeks before a frost. There is little advantage to waiting for our first frost that occurs usually about the 31st of October each year.

Having said that, some say that the tubers do get larger during that month or so before the first frost.

While that may be true there are many negatives in waiting to dig. Here in Oregon, the Fall rains usually start about September 15th and increase in severity every week thereafter until they reach their maximum about December 1st. Dahlias dug before the soil is over saturated store better. We like to dig our dahlias in October and finish in the first week of November. There are nearly always some nice dry days during this period and it is usually not very cold either.

What is the first step? Phil Mingu always goes into his field and cuts down the dahlia stalks a few days (or as long as week) before he digs them. He does this because the tuber clumps will respond to the loss of the stalks by swelling the eyes, making them easy to see. This is very advantageous especially for varieties that have difficult to see eyes. Whether you do this step or not, the stalks do need to be cut off the plants and removed before you dig them. We like to leave about 6-7 inches of the stalks on the tuber clumps so that you can use them as a handle during the lifting process. Then it is imperative that you label the clump before or just after you dig it. There are many ways to label the clumps and one of the easiest is to use flagging tape that is tightly tied to a stalk. We use the tag we placed near the clump and use a rubber band to tie the tag to the clump.

Digging the clumps: The best tool for digging dahlias is a spade (not a shovel). A spade has straight blade and a squared off bottom. Our spade is about 8 inches wide and about 12 inches long. It has a long handle like a shovel.

The dahlia clump needs to be loosened from the soil by pushing the spade into the soil on all four sides of the clump. If you do this properly, you will cut off the hair roots that hold the clump tightly to the soil. Then using the spade, the clump can be lifted and the stalks that you previously shortened, used as handle to pull the clump from the ground. If you have heavy soil, you may want to remove some of the soil from the top of the clump before you lift it out. Remove by hand as much of the soil from the clump being careful not disturb the tubers that must remain firmly attached to the stalks. If you allow the tubers to sag, the necks will break and the tubers will be worthless. Varieties that have long, skinny tubers must be treated carefully and it helps to remove the soil from the top of the clump before lifting as the heavy soil pushes down on the delicate tubers. I sometimes remove a tuber or two from these clumps even before the clump is lifted..

Washing the clumps before dividing: There are two ways to remove the excess soil from tuber clumps before dividing. The older method is to use a hose end sprayer and to gently spray the clumps to remove the dirt. During the cooler Fall weather this can be a cold and messy job. Usually, one waits until the end of the digging day to wash the tubers because you will get very wet and very cold. We have switched to using air from a compressor to clean off the tubers. We carry the labeled clumps in plastic boxes from the field to our garage where we stack them for a day or two or three before we divide them. Just before we divide, we take the tuber clump outside and use the air tool to remove the soil. Be sure to wear safety glasses when you do this. The tuber clumps are dry and a small coating of soil remains on them. This coating may even help them in storage.

Dividing tuber clumps: Whatever method or tools that you use, the goal is have a tuber that has at least one eye surrounded by enough tissue that it will store. Dahlias

vary greatly in the sizes and shapes of the tubers. Varieties that have short round tubers are the easiest to divide and store. Varieties that have long skinny tubers with delicate skinny necks can be stored but great care must be taken not to break or crack the neck of the tuber. Tubers that have broken or cracked necks will not sprout and should be discarded.

Eyes on the tubers are very near the area where the tuber attaches to the stalk. The goal is to cut the tuber off of the stalk with a small amount of stalk material around the eye. If too much stalk material is left on the tuber, it will tend to rot (stalks of dahlias tend to rot during storage). If too little material surrounds the eyes, the eyes may dry up and not store.

Using a knife (not recommended) or a pair of bonsai scissors (recommended) or a pair of good hand pruners, cut above and around on all sides of the tuber where it attaches to the stalk. Trim the material around the eyes so that about 1/4 inch of material surrounds the eye(s). Remove the tail of the tuber and all feeder roots with scissors. The tuber should now look nice and clean and are nearly ready to be stored.

Labeling tubers: Many people in the past used "No Blot" pencils to label individual tubers. This pencil has aniline dye where the graphite would be in a pencil. It is water soluble and makes an indelible ink. It is slightly poisonous and one should never put the pencil in your mouth. These aniline pencils are no longer being made by the original maker under the "No Blot" label. There are other companies that make them but they are not readily available and are very inferior.

Nowadays, most people use "Sharpies" or rubber stamps to mark tubers. Sharpies work reasonably well on dry tubers but hardly at all on damp tubers. Those who use rubber stamps use a three digit number for each tuber variety and use the rubber stamps with changeable numbers. Either way the writing is very indelible and generally can be read on the tuber even after being grown for a season in the soil.

Some tips on dividing: Sometimes two tubers share the same eye. Do not separate them. Very small tubers do not store well. Tubers should be at least as big as your pinkie finger and preferably bigger than your thumb. Use loppers to cut the stalks off to the level of the first tubers. In many cases you will need to split the tuber clump in order to remove tubers. Use a stocky knife that has about a 5-6 inch blade to split the clumps. Insert the knife into the solid part of the stock and twist the knife to cause the clump to divide. Assemble several tools in

your dividing area. You will need a sharp set of scissors (cheap titanium scissors are best as they stay sharp), hand pruners, bonsai scissors, a stout knife, and full sized loppers. Use scissors to cutoff hair roots and tails. Use bonsai scissors as your main tool to remove tubers. Use hand pruners when the bonsai scissors are too small. Use the loppers to cut off the stalks.

After you divide the tubers, they need to dry before labeling (unless you are using a "No Blot" pencil). They also need to air dry to "cure" the tubers for storage. In dry weather the drying may take only a day or two but in wet weather two or three days is needed.