

Garden Club of Montclair For the Love of Dahlias 2026 Version

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with helpful input from Celia Radek, Barbara Meyer and Claire Stepleton--
Our resident Dahlia Divas, past and present, here at the club.

CHOOSING YOUR DAHLIAS

Ready to fall in love? The dahlia is the most diverse flower in color and form in the natural world. It is an octoploid, meaning it has 8 sets of chromosomes compared to our diploid (2) sets. Some aspects of the dahlia to help narrow your choices:

Height—mere inches to more than 6 feet in height

Color—what moves you, coordinates with your garden, favorite vase, etc

Support method—stakes, tomato cages, decorative supports

Use—cutting garden for fun or design, highlight your garden, competition (or all three)

Needs—8 hours sun is best, light afternoon shade and regular fertilization

Start shopping in January-February for dahlia tubers. Use Google Images to shop around if you just have a name or type you want. Don't wait too long to order because the most beautiful and in demand often sell out. The ugly, brown tubers can be skinny (called 'chicken feet' by growers) or plump like sweet potatoes. **Carefully consider height** if you are adding to your established garden but be prepared for some variations. Current grower trends are in favor of shorter dahlias—easier to stake and harvest.

You will be tempted to choose only your favorite colors but give space for yellows, whites or bi-colored or tipped varieties for prettier groupings. Pinks and purples are lovely but throw in some white, yellow, red or orange and you won't regret it.

Descriptions from your growing sources are important. You want the best plants for your efforts. Strong stems, heavy or 'prolific' bloom, tendency to win awards and other characteristics matter as much as the first-glance beauty of a dahlia.

Example:

'Cornel'

This variety is a MUST HAVE for those who exhibit. Blooms are 3.5" of dark red that grow on strong, straight stems. Very showy variety on the bush and nice in the garden too. Plant height grows to 4'. Recommended as a cut flower.

For those who want their dahlias blooming ASAP please refer to the Dahlia Society of Georgia's (DSG) list of **"heat tolerant" dahlias**. These plants are native to the mountains of Mexico and cool nights are their preference. Here in Essex County, NJ our muggy summers delay the bloom of many of our favorites, especially the huge "Dinnerplate" varieties.

The sizable list of reliable summer bloomers will pop in mid July-August well before the fall show we see from most other types. Just visit dahliasocietyofgeorgia.com for this list as well as other tips. **Google** is your best friend when you are looking for a dahlia by name, type or color and growers will pop up too when you search by name. Claire Stepleton has found lovely dahlias at grocery stores and garden centers in the area. Flower shows usually bring in vendors with good stock as well. The great website **Dave's Garden** can often give you ratings for online retailers and I've included our favorite growers at the end of this handout.

Dahlias are classified in size, form, and color using codes. The list below is used by the Dahlia Society of Georgia (DSG).

SIZES

GIANT (AA OVER 10")
 LARGE (A 8" – 10")
 MEDIUM (B 6"- 8")
 SMALL (BB 4"- 6")
 MINATURE (M, UP TO 4")
 BALL (BA, OVER 3.5")
 BALL (MB 2"- 3.5")
 SINGLE (S, OVER 2")
 MINGON SINGLE (MS, UP TO 2")
 POMPON (P, UP TO 2")

FORMS

(FD) FORMAL DECORATIVE
 (ID) INFORMAL DECORATIVE
 (SC) SEMI-CACTUS
 (C) CACTUS
 (IC) INCURVED CACTUS
 (LC) LACINIATED
 (BA) BALL, (MB) MINIATURE BALL
 (WL) WATERLILLY
 (S) SINGLE, (MS) MINGON SINGLE
 (O) ORCHID (P), (ST) STELLAR
 (P) PEONY, (A) ANEMONE
 (CO) COLLARETTE
 (NX) NOVELTY DOUBLE CENTER
 (NO) NOVELTY OPEN CENTER

COLOR CLASSES

(BI) BICOLOR
 (BK) BLACK
 (BR) BRONZE
 (DB) DARK BLEND
 (DP) DARK PINK
 (DR) DARK RED MINIATURE
 (FL) FLAME BEND
 (L) LAVENDER
 (LB) LIGHT BLEND
 (OR) ORANGE
 (PK) PINK, (PR) PURPLE
 (V) VARIEGATED
 (R) RED, (W) WHITE
 (Y) YELLOW D

PLANTING YOUR DAHLIAS

If mixed in your garden, keep dahlia heights in line with perennials and shrubs.

Tall dahlias should be planted in the back but with access so you can deadhead, adjust staking, fertilize, disbud (removing side buds to promote larger central flower) and harvest. Avoid south or west walls of your home because dahlias prefer cool evenings.

Support is critical because dahlias can wander quite a bit if not given direction and stalks can easily break in the heavy rains and winds of fall when bloom really steps up. Add stakes or supports as you plant to avoid damaging the tuber—it also provides a marker until plants sprout. **Celia recommends a tall stake to which you can continually fasten the dahlia stalk as it grows to its predicted height.** It is extremely helpful to use name tags to identify the dahlias you plant. I like to use decorative metal supports, like **tuteurs**, which can hold one inner plant with more secured around its perimeter. Seriously—save yourself the heartbreak and support those beauties to keep them standing tall.

Tubers can easily rot if soil is too cold or too wet. We must wait out the spring rains and look for nights at 60 degrees before planting. You can pot your tubers with garden soil and your chosen amendments if you are having a wet and chilly spring, such as 2018, and add to your garden later. Potting up extras, or what I call "stunt plants", helps when one needs to fill in for a dahlia disappointment.

Please note that heavy clay soil won't allow water to drain or roots to spread easily so adding some peat or organic material to lighten soil is best for all plants. Some gardeners regularly add untreated playground sand and other amendments to amend soil and DSG club

member Fred Nicholas adds his secret mix of three items—**handful of bone meal, a systemic pesticide like Bayer 2 in 1 Rose and Flower Care and slow release fertilizer Osmacote**. Barbara Meyer, our club's rose expert and Dahlia Diva, adds the rose food **Mills Magic Rose Mix** when planting (available from Beaty Fertilizer) and lots of new garden soil. Celia Radek, our tulip master and all around garden guru at Avis Campbell, adds a handful of **bone meal** at planting. I've been adding a handful of composted manure at planting and top dressing with same a month or two later. This offers a good dose of nitrogen to get the greenery going.

Dig a 12x12" hole about 6" deep, lay tuber on its side with eye facing up if you can find it, add your amendments and/or fertilizer, secure stake in hole and cover. Plants can be 12-18" or as much as 2-3' apart. Beware that any use of bone meal can attract neighborhood dogs and nighttime visitors, possibly foxes, who like to dig up the tubers. Surrounding each tuber with a short tube of chicken wire will keep hungry bunnies from eating the sprouts. **Keep an eye on your tubers once you tuck them in!**

CARE AND FEEDING

There is no need to water before your tubers sprout and once they reach 12" pinch out the top shoot for a bushier plant with more blooms. This also keeps the stalk dense—not pinching encourages hollow stems. Dahlias generally need an inch of water per week. The DSG suggests limiting the plants to three stalks for larger flowers—simply cut any others close to the ground. Critters such as rabbits and groundhogs should be kept from damaging your newbies. **Barbara uses green wire woven in sheets (similar to chicken wire) with which she makes tall tubes to surround the plants.** The rolls come in 2, 3 or 4' heights and blend in the garden and provide lots of support. **Mulch your dahlias once they are taller to keep roots cool because they run close to the surface.**

At Avis Campbell Gardens (ACG), Celia uses a **seaweed and fish emulsion every two weeks to fertilize her dahlias**. She also recommends adding a TBSP of triple phosphate to any dahlia that needs a boost. Celia has had good luck growing small dahlias in pots at home as well. Barbara fertilizes every two weeks or so with **Miracle Grow**, spraying as a foliar feed for her plants at home. She specializes in the 'Dinnerplate' dahlias of enormous size and beauty.

A word of caution about fertilizers-- after two years of lackluster dahlia bloom I found an article by Ted Kennedy of the **Portland Dahlia Society** who warns that phosphorus, the 'P' in a fertilizer's NPK ration, can build up in garden soil over years and interfere with a dahlia's mineral uptake. I was using **Garden Elements Bud n'Bloom**, with an N-P-K ratio of 10-52-8 every two weeks as a foliar spray. I shelved that and in 2021 I added fresh soil, used greensand at planting and switched to **Doctor Earth Flower Girl Organic Bud & Bloom Booster** (3-9-4). In 2025, per **Swan Island Dahlias** website, I started fertilizing with **Alaska Morbloom** in August which has an NPK of 0-10-10 to boost my blooms. High phosphorus treatments like these are best used as foliar sprays to avoid over-dosing the soil

As for pests, **Sluggo** is recommended to combat snails, slugs and earwigs. Insecticidal soap or **Mavrick** can take care of cucumber beetles (green ladybug type, kind of cute) and spider mites. **Bayer Bio Advanced Insect, Disease and Mite Control** is helpful as is horticultural oil or Neem oil. **Swan Island Dahlias** has great recommendations for insect control products on their website as well. Don't spray in full sun—it may burn the plants. The furry pests known as

groundhogs are my latest nemesis. Constructing tubes of coated wire with rectangular openings for the plants was recommended to me by club member Heidi Muschick. Stronger than chicken wire and sold at **Home Depot**, these keep the groundhogs at bay. I secure each with landscape staples and stakes once the dahlias have grown tall. This restricts access to the plants for the groundhogs (and me, unfortunately). I've read that the critters despise castor oil so I've been draping soaked pieces of cloth on the tubes as an added measure and it seems to be working.

Johnny's Selected Seeds claims that nasturtiums drive away cucumber beetles. I planted three pretty types at ACG and home and did see a significant reduction in the beetles among my dahlias. Adding a systemic insecticide at planting, as suggested by the DSG, can prevent problems before they happen but I am concerned about the bees who visit. Keep in mind also that a dry garden invites spider mites so hosing down your garden during dry spells is a good practice.

OVERWINTERING

Cannas, elephant ears and dahlias can be dug in the fall and stored for next season. If you love your dahlia enough, it will be worth it. Wait for the first frost to wilt the plant's leaves before you begin. Use a garden fork and start about 12" from stalk to avoid damaging the tubers. There are many different methods of storing for the winter but the **goal is to keep the tuber from rotting from too much water or drying out from too little.**

At Avis Campbell Gardens, Celia simply lifts her dahlias in a clump with a garden fork, uses blue painter's tape on the stem to identify, brushes off the dirt, clips away both roots and skinny bits and then **packs with crumpled newspaper in a plastic crate.** She then stores them in her unheated basement against an outer, northern wall and checks them periodically to make sure they don't dry out. She spritzes them with water every so often as well. Barbara chooses to lift her tubers, hose off dirt, trim them, let dry for a day and **store in perlite in open plastic bags** against an outer wall of her basement. She cautions to be careful not to breathe in perlite dust. Sarah Olson cleans her dahlia tubers, trims roots, dries them, cuts them apart from one another and wraps each in Saran Wrap for storage in her attached garage. This method keeps tubers from drying out in storage. I hose down my dahlias, secure tags to clumps with rubber bands and treat with Neem oil spray. I let them dry/cure for about 3 days, snip off stem, roots and skinny ends, then pack them in **cedar pet bedding and place in plastic bins.** Bins are kept against an outer wall in the colder part of my basement and lids remain loose until weather turns freezing. I also check occasionally and mist with water if dry. Condensation often appears in the bins on the side placed against the wall. I fluff up the wet wood chips and turn the bins to keep rot from setting in.

We all trim off as much of the green stem as possible, as it will rot and ruin the tuber, and also clip off the roots and any skinny ends of the tuber which are prone to drying. Don't cure your tubers on stone, brick or concrete after washing or treating—they're likely to dry out too much. The **American Dahlia Society** recommends cedar shavings, such as small pet bedding, for storage. Very often you will see tubers arrive packed in these shavings or in perlite—these seem to be the industry's favored storage mediums.

Growers and some gardeners prefer to separate dug tubers in fall, cutting each with a piece of stem where an eye is apparent. **Each tuber must have an eye, like potatoes do, in order to sprout.** It can be hard to locate these in Fall and freshly dug tubers break easily so I prefer to store clumps whole or chop the clump in half with a spade. I can sometimes wiggle the clumps apart in the spring when they've shrunk a bit from overwintering. In Spring, the eyes tend to swell or actually sprout new stems while in storage so it's much easier to see. Please refer to **Old House Dahlias** for great instructional videos available on their website that show the Fall and Spring processes very clearly.

Recommended Online and Local Dahlia Sources and the gardeners that love them:

Claire Stepleton:

Swan Island
Whole Foods
Acme
Breck's

Favs: 'Kelvin Floodlight,' 'Color Spectacle,' 'Gabrielle Marie,' 'Labyrinth'

Barbara Meyer:

Longfield Gardens (Lakewood, NJ)
American Meadows (Williston, VT)
Eden Brothers (Asheville, NC)

Favs: 'Tequila Sunrise,' 'Firepot,' 'American Dawn,' 'Haley Jane'

Celia Radek:

Longfield Gardens
Brent & Becky's
Swan Island Dahlias
Endless Summer Dahlias
Favs: 'Thomas Edison,' 'Miracle Princess'

Maureen Sprong:

Arrowhead Dahlias
Stonehouse Dahlias
Swan Island Dahlias
Old House Gardens
Summers Dream Farm
JS Dahlias
White Flower Farm
Favs: 'Caitlyn's Joy,' 'Rose Toscano,' 'AC Devin,' 'Juanita,' 'Bacardi'

Georgia Dahlia Society:

(Remember to cross-check Heat-Tolerant list on website)
Accent Dahlias
Hollyhill Dahlias

Clear View Dahlias
JS Dahlias
Cowlitz River Dahlias
Ferncliff Gardens
Lobaugh's Dahlias

Avis Campbell beds 2017-26:

Bed Captains at ACG are able to select plants for their respective beds that enhance the perennials and annuals they prefer. These are some of the dahlias they've chosen over the years.

Enchantress
Gabrielle Marie
Juanita
Cornel
Yellow Delight
Deuil du Roi Albert
Happy Single Date
Happy Single Flame
Happy Single Party
Café Au Lait
XXL Aztec Veracruz
Color Spectacle
Miracle Princess
Le Baron
Crème de Cassis
Kelvin Floodlight
Deuil du Roi Albert
Crazy Love
Sonic Bloom
Gabrielle Marie
American Dream
Miss Delilah
Sonic Bloom
Labyrinth
Two-Tone Labyrinth
Shaggy Chic
Lavender Perfection
Bumble Rumble
Great Silence
September Morn
Shaggy Chic

Shiloh Noelle
Obsidian
Mikayla Miranda
Bacardi
Blyton Softer Gleam

A hearty thank you to the ACG Bed Captains who grow dahlias and have faith in the experiment!