

Niagara College Greenhouse & Nursery Success Sheet No. 30

Dahlia

Form

The dahlia, a native of Mexico, comes in two types—the smaller, annual dahlia and the larger, tuberous, tender perennial. Although annual blossoms are smaller, they come in many shades—all but blue—and have a variety of single, semi-double, double and collarette flower forms.

Annual dahlias can reach 1 to 2 feet and spread about half as wide, making them appropriate for formal or informal, fore- or midground containers or beds. Perennial dahlias feature the same color range, but the plants (1 to 7 feet tall) and flowers can be larger (several inches to a foot), and forms are slightly more exuberant—pompons, spiky-petaled varieties and cactus-like flowers. Because of their size, perennial dahlias should be placed in the mid- to background of the border.

Dahlia blooms are long lasting, showy and good for cutting. Leaves are mid to dark green and oval or divided, offering a medium to coarse texture. Pinch the tips out of dahlias early to encourage a bushier form, and deadhead for extended blooming.

Light and Temperature

Dahlias like full sun but will tolerate some shade. Annual dahlias can be grown in zones 3 to 11, perennials 8 to 11 if the soil is well drained and doesn't freeze. Dahlias might not thrive in hot summer weather and could benefit from midday shading. Perennial, tuberous begonias can be dug up after die-back from the first frost and stored in sand or peat in a cool, dry place.

Pests

Occasional attacks by aphids, powdery mildew and spider mites occur. Potato leafhoppers, European corn borers, beetles, slugs, snails and viral diseases sometimes attack perennial dahlias. Earwigs are known to eat the flowers and foliage in prone areas.

Culture

For annuals, sow indoors at 68° F. to 85° F. six to eight weeks before the last frost, or directly sow them outside if the growing season is long. Plant them 12 inches apart.

For perennials, plant tuberous roots horizontally in holes 6 inches deep under 3 to 4 inches of soil (once warmed). If using stored stock, divide them two to four weeks before planting, and set them into moist sand. As the shoots grow, progressively add 3 inches of soil to cover. Smaller varieties can be planted 1 to 2 feet apart, and larger varieties 3 to 4. If started from seed, they will bloom in the same season, just not as soon as annuals. Tall plants may need loosely fastened staking when they become around 2 feet tall.

Soil

Soil should be well drained and rich in organic matter. Keep it evenly moist and fertilize the plants with a high-nitrogen fertilizer every week from midsummer to autumn.

Krystal Kretschmer, Class of 2003

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Niagara-on-the-Lake Campus, 135 Taylor Road, Niagara-on-the-Lake, ON L0S 1J0
phone: (905) 641-2252, ext. 4082; fax: (905) 988-4307 e-mail: mnewell@niagaracollege.ca
Website: <http://greenhousenursery.niagaracollege.ca>