

RUMINATIONS OF A DAHLIA TUBER

Wha-at! I think I have been reborn again! I can only hope this next life is better than my last. I cannot recall how many lives I have had, but it seems more than most, possibly by luck and good caregivers. Many other tubers are not so fortunate. Some tubers are merely dug up and thrown into a large can. I have never known what happens to them but they are never seen again. Others like me are carefully cleaned off, dried and packed away in large containers in a dry medium to while away the long winter in the frigid climate of the area where I live. One year it was peat moss, and the last several years it was dried chips of wood that were very fragrant. The only hard parts about that are withstanding the discomfort of pieces of me being lopped off and then being dusted with a repugnant powdery stuff they seem to call sulfur. In prior lives, I have heard from neighboring tubers that they spent some of their lives in warm climates, and are never treated this way. They are just left peacefully in the ground, waiting for the right conditions to come to life again. Their penalty is often a difficulty to understand the local language because so many came from foreign countries. Also, they seem to be treated like orphans since no one knows their proper names in America.

Now I am facing the ultimate test of survival for a new life: the inspection by my caregiver, starting with my general health and appearance, and finishing with scrutiny of a tag attached to me. Decision time: do I go into the trash barrel where I would disappear, or into a new nurturing home where I can grow and live many lives. Unfortunately, there is not much I can do about it to influence the decision of my caregiver. In addition, everything that influences his decision is in his control: my condition, the size, form and color of my flowers, and his personal preference for one or more of the eighteen different forms of dahlia flowers. Unless his wife is the decider in the family!

The experience this year will be brutal because of what happened last year. I am in the hands of one of the worst dahlia growers on the planet, and that is in the best of times, which makes me very surprised to have survived. When I went through this process last year, all seemed well, and I emerged to new life in a well-lit basement room, embedded in a moistened peat moss, and taken care of for several weeks. Then my caregiver disappeared for a week resulting in a really tough week without heat, light or water. Then he returned for a short period for several weeks, and I had to go through it again. I survived, but others were not so fortunate. Some tried to come to life but died, and others just rotted in the medium until the smell got so bad, they hit the trash barrel. Das war nicht gut! Pardon, Madames et Monsieurs, my roots are elsewhere (wow, that is an awful pun!). Having spent my early years in Belgium, I sometimes forget I have come to America for many recent lives.

In any event, I finally reached the really tough point where my caregiver started cutting my new body off of my old body (I was then a new sprout about four inches high and had good leaves), dipping my mouth in some awful tasting, germ-killing powder seemingly designed to kill anything living, and then plunging me mouth-first into a dark, moist hole, with foam walls, where I was supposed to sip life-giving moisture and grow some new feet. I know it sounds crazy, but we dahlias take nourishment except for light from the opposite end as humans. Fortunately, my caregiver did not fully cover my mouth with the powder, so I was able to sip enough moisture to stay alive.

Then I noticed a huge difference in my caregiver. He had a large bandage on his foot, and could hardly get down to his basement room to keep me watered. Talk about stress, I was about to give up all hope of a future life. However, he kept us just wet enough to allow some roots to form, and experimented with all

kinds of water levels and additives. All that was missing from the scene was Igor, Frankenstein's lab assistant. He bought special lights to help me grow, but the idiot never wired them up, so we had to rely on scarce sunlight through the basement windows and some ceiling neon lights which he left on occasionally. Many of my friends died, and were thrown into the trash can, but many others did miraculously survive. When I emerged from my tuber, I saw that I had many fellow offspring, but we got separated during the planting process, and probably many were thrown in the can. Some tubers produced very large families with many siblings. My caregiver also bought a heating pad, and we were placed on it along with some seed beds and it felt good, causing me to eat more, produce roots and grow taller.

Then my caregiver left again, this time with many bags, and I thought all was lost. Amazingly, I survived again, and when he returned, I was lifted up and inspected. Apparently, he found my roots satisfactorily developed, because I was plunged, foam container and all, into a small pot containing a potting soil and some nutrients, watered heavily, and given more regular light. Now I looked around and found myself surrounded by several hundred plants, with more being moved in with us every day. Watering became a daily event, and it sometimes included some special nutrients which really gave me energy to grow. Limping around as he was, our caregiver looked like a very unreliable planter, and we all feared for our lives. However, he finally moved all of the pans full of plants out into the sunlight on his patio, and we got used to some warm days and some chilly nights. Our biggest fear then was the many wild deer that strolled through his yard during the day and night, but somehow we avoided being eaten. Our caregiver took several hundred of my potted friends out to his car, and they were driven away never to be seen again. I hope they were bought by better and more loving gardeners than he is. I also prayed I would be given a new home but, alas, such was not my fortune. Both of us may need a new god.

My caregiver seemed to have nine different areas in his yard where he planted dahlias, and we doubted he would be able to plow the areas up and actually plant us. Once again, the old guy kept at it, and prepared an area, one by one, and dug his holes, softened the soil, put in special fertilizers, and planted each of us separately, leaving about three feet between plants. Even at that, after over 130 plants, he ran out of room, and the leftovers were given to various workers around his home, or hit the dreaded barrel. Each of us got a support, some were green-painted steel rods, and some were tall, strong cages. I got a cage, which I really prefer, because with such a lazy caregiver, who was gone so much and failed to tie my branches up as I grew, I always had the support of the sides of the cage, and could safely grow tall. In each case, the tag was removed from us and attached to the support.

Many of the planting areas were surrounded by a thin metal ring about sixteen inches in diameter, and about six inches high with two inches buried in the soil around us. I really like this because it keeps the water and nutrients nearby where I can get to them. This is especially important if you have a lazy caregiver like I do who waters so little and so seldom. The other thing he failed to do was to dis-bud me, breaking off many of the tiny buds on a stem below a flower so the one flower will get all the nourishment and grow really big. He had a friend come over once, who showed him how to dis-bud, but my loser of a gardener never followed through. The result was many small flowers rather than a few really large blossoms which we tubers are all proud to produce. I would like to be recognized as a champion at a major dahlia show before my time is up.

Then the jerk took off again, praying for rain before he left, and only the generosity of his neighbor kept some of us alive. It was very sorrowful for me to see the poor dahlia plants in gardens too difficult to water, slowly wither and die, never to be reborn again. However, many of the plants that lived, put out huge flowers in spite of the brutal conditions, and we really enjoyed the happy looks on the faces of the

many visitors who came to look at the gardens and take home the flowers we produce. This was a wonderful time for all of us. Just when things looked good, our caregiver left again, and this was right in the heart of the blooming season. Things were never the same. When he returned, few beautiful flowers were left, we were very dry, and we were all waiting for the dreaded **first hard frost**.

It came at last, ending the suffering of us all. Our caregiver finally came out and, one by one, cut off our stem about four inches off the ground, removed the support, carefully dug us up and removed the soil around our body sections. After a wash-off with the hose, we were left to dry in the sun and overnight, and then moved to his basement room for trimming, and storage again for the winter. Throughout this process, he did take care to keep the name tag with the tuber and make out new ones as required. It was a shock to see how few of us were left. Out of 135 tubers, probably only about 100 were stored; the rest had to be tossed.

However, the real shock was in seeing how many were thrown in the can when they were removed from the storage boxes this February. It was a tough winter in his unheated attic. Our caregiver left us in through the first really cold spell, and then brought us into a warm upstairs bedroom for a long period. Talk about stupid shock treatment! Then we were taken back out into the freezing attic again. This time he just left us there. The only thing that probably saved us was the very thick Styrofoam chests he stored us in. However, we could tell from the odor of mildew that many of the tubers had died during the winter. We could hardly wait to be released from the fetid boxes. I think our owner was too cheap to buy new wood chips for the year, and used the ones from the last year which probably led to the awful mold. I notice he tossed out the old stuff this year. Could this indicate a learning curve? Miracles happen. I even heard him tell his wife he was going to wash out the chests with a strong chlorine solution to prevent mold recurring if he does this again next year. Maybe someone else will buy me at the coming sale.

However, several days ago, I poked my head out of my tuber, and looked around. I am back in the pan in the well-lighted room, surrounded by many other pans of tubers in wet peat moss. And, wonderfully, I noticed I had a sibling growing right next to me out of our joint tuber. Our caregiver saw us a day later, and thought we might be all he would see this year. However, several more sprouts peaked out of other tubers the next day, and now several other tubers are showing signs of rebirth. Maybe this year will be better than last, and possibly with really good luck, I will be sold off or given to another owner who would have to be better than this poor excuse for a gardener. The way he is limping around, we have to prepare for the worst again.

by Stan Hadley, Central States Dahlia Society