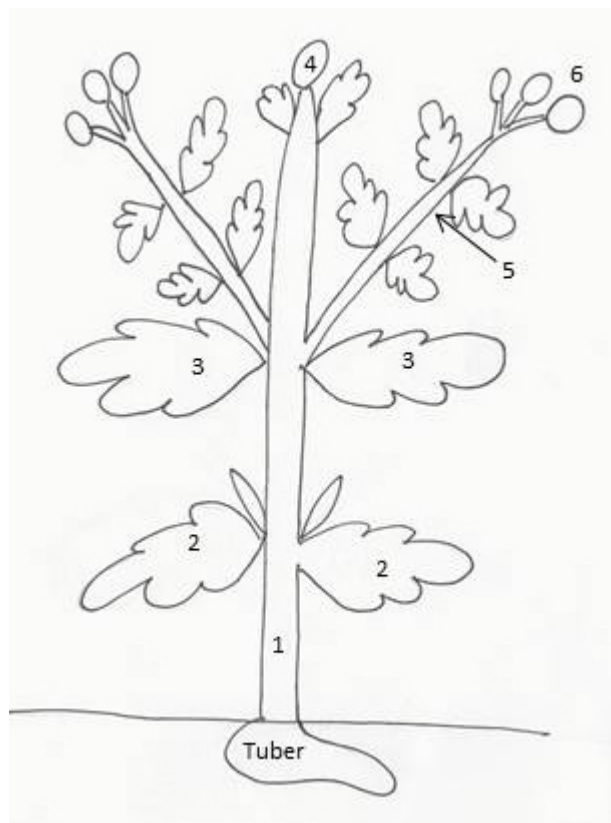


## ADS Dahlia University – Grooming Your Dahlias

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First let's look at the anatomy of a dahlia plant and define the terms to be used in this lesson. Please reference the rather silly, but hopefully instructional, picture below.



The main stalk/stem (1) emanates directly from the tuber (from an eye).

The first pair of leaves (2) above the ground are called the cotyledon leaves. When counting leaf pairs do not count this pair. If desired, you may remove these leaves to increase air circulation and to make it easier to see where the stem is coming out of the ground.

Other leaves will develop in pairs (3), opposite each other, throughout the plant. Notice that leaves come out of the main stem, or a lateral/branch, at about a 45-90 degree angle. (The leaf pairs will alternate. If the lowest pair is oriented east-west the next pair up the stem or lateral/branch will be oriented north-south. This is not reflected in the picture.)

If allowed to grow, a terminal bud (4) will develop atop the main stem, in the center of the plant.

Laterals/branches (5) grow from the main stem or other laterals/branches. They come out at about a

30 to 45 degree angle, right above a leaf.

Buds (6) develop in fives - three on the ends of your laterals along with two more buds at the next lower leaf pair.

Some dahlia growers begin their grooming right when the main stem(s) comes from the tuber eye(s), by allowing only one stem to remain. This forces all the energy to one main stem. Other growers allow multiple main stems if the tuber provides them.

Grooming is best done in the morning or evening when the plants are crisp with moisture. It will be easier to break out unwanted parts of the plant, and the breaks will be cleaner. If unwanted parts of the plants do not break off easily and you use scissors or even your thumbnail to remove them, be sure to sterilize your tool between plants to avoid transferring any possible virus from plant to plant.

**There are three major pruning activities for dahlias.** This author recommends that all growers top and disbud their plants. Disbranching is a little more advanced and you can choose how much you want to do.

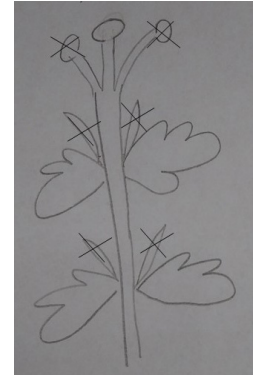
**Topping** - As the plant grows it will produce a bud at the top of the main stem. You do not want to allow this single early flower. It will delay the development of your laterals; and hence, all your other blooms. To avoid the terminal bloom, count your leaf pairs above the cotyledon leaves, and following Table 1 below, pinch out the center of the plant above the leaves to be kept, leaving the laterals just above the highest leaf pair. Don't delay in topping your plants - when you are at the appropriate number of leaf pairs, top the plant.

Table 1 - Guideline for topping the plants:

Variety Size	Leaf pairs (from main stem) to be kept
AA and A	2-3
B	3-4
BB	3-4
M	3-4
Ball	3-4

You will only top a plant once.

**Disbudding** – Dahlias produce (almost always) three buds at the end of a lateral along with perhaps two more buds at the next lower leaf pair. Remove the outer two buds of the set of three and also the two below if they exist; thus, saving only one flower of the group of five. For a longer stem, remove one or two pairs of laterals going down the stem. Don't remove the leaves! See picture right.



**Disbranching** – is done for several reasons: to cause larger blooms on large varieties; to control the size and shape of the plant; and, to open the plant up for better air circulation. As the laterals grow some can be removed, thus limiting the number of blooms. Show flower growers will only allow 3-4 blooms on large varieties (AA, A, B) and 5-6 on medium sized (BB, M, and Ball) varieties. Break off or nip with scissors each lateral you don't want. Remove the lateral as close to the stem as possible. This is best done in the morning or evening when the plants are crisp with moisture – the break will be easier to make and cleaner. If you use scissors or even your thumbnail to dig out the lateral, be sure to sterilize your tool between plants to help avoid transferring virus from plant to plant. The table below shows guidelines for optimum blooms. If you want more blooms you can certainly disbranch less.

Variety Size	Leaf pairs (from main stem) to be kept	
AA and A	2-3	3-4
B	3-4	3-4
BB	3-4	4-5
M	3-4	5-6
	3-4	5-6

*Our courses are written by dahlia enthusiasts, not necessarily scientists or horticulturalists. These enthusiasts are pleased to share their experience and best practices with you. Please keep in mind that there are a variety of opinions in the dahlia community and that different solutions and procedures work in different circumstances and locales. We urge you to participate in a [local society](#) where you will meet great growers with knowledge of growing dahlias in your area...and you'll have fun!*

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