

ADS Dahlia University – Starting Tubers

Starting Dahlias Indoors

Dahlia growers may want to start their dahlias indoors for two reasons: to give them a head start before planting them outdoors and to increase stock by taking cuttings. Both require indoor space, but taking cuttings is more complex (see course on Cuttings for details.).

Giving Your Tubers a Head Start

There are several reasons you may want to give your dahlia tubers a head start indoors. If your dahlia garden is wet and boggy, you may not be able to plant outdoors until mid-June or later —and you may not have blooms until September or October. By giving your tubers a jump start indoors, you can set out growing plants and speed up the blooming process.

Another reason to start your tubers indoors may be simply to get them blooming as soon as possible. You may have ideal growing conditions, could plant your tubers in late April or early May, and have blooms from late July until frost. By starting your tubers indoors, you could have even earlier blooms.

And finally, there are times when instant dahlia plants are advantageous. For instance, if you are planting in a public garden, a bunch of stakes with no plants may be unwanted. Growing plants by the stakes, even if there aren't blooms, is more acceptable.



Tubers started indoors can be grown in 4-inch pots; larger size pots would be appreciated by the dahlias but take up more room. The plant above is in a 3½-inch pot and was planted one month before the picture was taken.



Dahlias planted indoors the first week of April will be well started by mid-May. While a greenhouse would be ideal, many growers find that a garage or basement works just fine. Place the pots under fluorescent lights about six inches above the tops of the pots. Big box stores sell utility shelving that works great for this purpose. The model shown can be taken down and stored when not in use; use two 4-foot fluorescent fixtures over each shelf. The units typically come with particle board shelves that should be replaced with exterior-grade plywood.

When setting up the tubers indoors, use a high quality soilless potting blend. Talk to reputable nurserymen and women in your area for recommendations, bearing in mind that the kids working in the box stores may have been on the job for a week or so and may have never grown a thing in their life. Just because a product is well known doesn't mean it's the best. And black "soil" doesn't necessarily indicate quality. A study several years ago found that some potting soils actually inhibited growth. Stick with products the pros use.

Water the tubers carefully. Do not overwater and let them get fairly dry between waterings. Some folks use a mild fertilizer on the cuttings, others wait until the plants are moved to the garden.

When transplanting the growing dahlias into the garden use the same technique as when you set out your tomatoes. It's preferable to remove the bottom one or two sets of leaves, making sure those nodes are then below the soil surface when the plant is planted in the garden. Ensure the transplanted dahlias are in a shallow "dish" so they can be well watered.

Though the ADS does not endorse products, your author has used Liquinox Grow™ for over 40 years when transplanting everything, including dahlias. My grandmother taught me that something in the product seems to prevent the plants from wilting.

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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