

Dahlias – Preparing for the storage of Tubers

By Dave Reid

The most asked for advice by growers is the question **‘How to be successful at lifting and storing Dahlia tubers?’**

When and how to go about this annual task commences in **early Autumn** –if we are to do the work successfully.

Before the first hard frost strikes the plant, make sure that all the correct labels are in place. This year I have tied them on to the stems of the plants during early October. This will also save time when lifting. It has been tedious work but it has been worth while. I use thin plastic coated wire, so that there is little chance of it deteriorating and falling off. The use of ‘twist it’ ties or string is not recommended.

When the **tops have been thoroughly frosted** is the time to commence lifting. There is one school of thought which recommends lifting while the stems remain green, so that the stem is in good condition assisting in better keeping.

I select a day that is sunny, preferably with a slight breeze, a day that you would select to lift your main crop of potatoes.

Cut the stems back to around six inches from the ground and with a fork or spade carefully lift the tuber out. Do not apply any leverage by handling the stem as you can easily do damage to the important crown area of the tuber. Remove carefully all the soil around the tubers and leave on the ground to allow drying of the surfaces.

Remove to a greenhouse staging or shed, turning them upside down to allow water to drain from the stem. To assist in the thorough removal of moisture, you can use a screwdriver or similar tool and drill a hole straight through the stem. The length of stem can now be cut back to around an inch long.

After around two weeks, **trim off the surplus fibrous roots** so that all that remains is the solid tuber. Check at this time that the label is properly secured, as there is likely to be shrinkage of the stem as it dries out. Large tubers at this stage can be cut back in length so that they are more manageable and take up less room in storage, finally on the propagating bench, treat the exposed flesh of the tuber with flowers of sulphur or ordinary garden lime to help seal the cut.

Before placing into final storage **make sure that all the surfaces are dry** and free from any moisture. After placing in boxes, dry peat, vermiculite, perlite or newspaper should be placed around them, after a dusting of flowers of sulphur has been applied. If you cannot get the puffer containers, place the flowers of sulphur into a piece of muslin and shake it on.

Dahlia tubers contain around 95% water and **should not be placed anywhere near a source of heat. The ideal place is where it can be assured it will be frost free.** The best possible place is the cellar of a house. Some growers set them up straight away into the propagating bed, ready for the next season.

Another method of storage is that used by our American colleagues who divide up each tuber into what they call '**chicken legs**'. Each leg consists of a section of tuber along with the important crown area at the base of the stem where the growth will take place. This method has a lot going for it as it reduces the storage space required and also makes sure that there is no moisture remaining.

During storage, **make regular checks** to find out if there is any deterioration. Cut away any rotten areas and treat again with flowers of sulphur.

Certain varieties do not make good keeping tubers, and some do not put much weight on and produce a lot of fibrous roots, which do not store well. These you can try potting up into garden soil or John Innes No 3 and place in a green house or shed to assist in their keeping.

Pot tubers should now be taken into the greenhouse or shed, after cutting back the top growth and again doing a label security check. They should be placed on their side and staked up under the green house staging. Do not remove the compost as it will assist in keeping them frost free.