

Preparation of Tubers for Propagation

The setting of tubers in preparation for propagation is now the main task as we look forward to another dahlia growing season. The main worry is: 'have the tubers survived without deterioration in storage?' or 'have they been affected by the severe frosts'? The winter weather has been more severe and prolonged to what we have been accustomed to in recent years. Many growers have been caught out by leaving the tubers in the ground.

Before setting the tubers in the final position for propagating, make sure that deterioration has not set in. The '*thumb nail test*' should be applied to the crown area. This will cut into the tissue either to reveal fresh tissue or the dreaded brown of rotting. Often a tuber will look to be in perfect condition, but this test can prove otherwise!

Large tubers can take up a lot of valuable room on the bench or tray. The tubers can be trimmed back to around 4 to 5 inches in length without any detriment. Seal off the cut area with green or yellow sulphur, or garden lime will suffice. Check that the variety label is properly secured as shrinkage of the old stem area, where secured, can shrink and loosen the tie. Trim off any small fibrous roots.

At this stage the tuber should be sprayed with normal water in what is called '*plumping*' them to assist them into life. A hand sprayer or the normal garden sprayer can be used. This can be done at regular intervals over several days. This can also soften up the crown area where the growth will develop, since if this area becomes dried out too much, it can prevent growth.

The medium in which the tubers are plunged can be of various types: old tomato compost or any other spent soil-less compost, along with peat are ideal. Tubers should be inserted up to just below the crown area, and then watered in. There is normally enough energy in the tuber to give sufficient nutrients, but you can apply a sprinkling of a general fertiliser. Sprinkle a few slug pellets throughout the bench or trays, as eggs of slugs often overwinter in the tuber cluster. In the heated bed, the temperature can be set at around 60 to 65 deg F initially, and it can be reduced or even taken off once growth has been established. To conserve heat in the bed I have placed fleece over the complete bed, which will assist in keeping in the heat, and will assist in speeding up growth as well as saving in heating costs.

Other than giant varieties, the best cuttings for all others is best done in mid April onwards. This will assist in producing plants the ideal size at planting out time. Early taken plants can be damaged by becoming pot bound, which they never properly recover from. Until the middle of April cutting material, growth can be cut back. If tubers fail to produce growth they can be brought into life by plunging a knife into the tubers along their length, or placing them on top of the greenhouse heater. This might assist in breaking their dormancy. Another means is to place the tuber into a plant pot immersed in damp peat up to around the crown area, to ease any excess drying out of this position. When inserting a knife into the tubers, make sure to take them off the bench first, as the knife can slip and finish up damaging the soil warming cable. It can, and it has happened!

Sometimes tubers will develop growth from under the tuber area, which is called '*hook growth*'. This growth should be removed as it will not make suitable cutting material.

Good propagating – **Dave Reid**.