

STORING DAHLIAS THE GPDS WAY

Those of us who live in the Philadelphia area have to dig up our dahlias and store them for the winter. It sometimes seems there are as many ways to store dahlias as there are dahlia varieties. Of course that's not the case, but most growers have their own successful time-tested procedures.

I thought it would be interesting to interview a number of the members of The Greater Philadelphia Dahlia Society to see how they store their tubers. Maybe one of their methods will suit your situation. I've noted the approximate number of tubers each member grows in parentheses after the member's name.

Long-time members Jim (200 tubers) and his brother Steve (250) Thomas both divide their tubers in the fall, which saves them storage space. Jim marks the tubers with a Sharpie pen, dips them in a weak Clorox solution, lets them dry, places them in open plastic bags, and covers them with coarse vermiculite. He then stores the bags on shelves in a special closet in his unheated garage. The closet is insulated and has a light bulb in it; if it gets too cold, he simply turns the light bulb on. Steve also has a closet. Steve pointed out that his closet is bigger than Jim's closet; he can walk into it, and it has shelves down both sides. After marking, tubers are dipped into a weak fungicide solution and stored in vermiculite-filled bags. Steve heats his closet with a small space heater hooked up to an old chicken house thermostat.

John Edwards (100) simply digs his tubers, washes, and marks them. Once they are dry, they are placed in cardboard boxes, with no storage medium, and located in his basement. John's basement stays cool, around 50 degrees. In the spring they are divided and ready for planting in peat-filled trays, for later installation into his garden.

Tim Elkner (30) divides in the fall. After cleaning and drying, he marks the tubers and places them in heavy paper bags, like the lined bags in which dog or cat food is sold. Of course, the animal food has already been removed from the bags! Tim doesn't use any storage medium. The bags are kept in his cellar which maintains a temperature of around 60 degrees. In late spring he plants the tubers straight into the ground.

Mike Horn (100) divides his tubers in the fall, then places them in black nursery pots like those shrubs are sold in. Mike marks the pots, puts the tubers in, and adds any kind of vermiculite he can get. The pots then go on shelves in an unheated garage. His garage doesn't freeze since it adjoins two sides of his home. Mike plants in early- to mid-May directly into the garden.

Brent Grant (200) has an unusual method for storing his tubers. In his unheated workshop/garage he has built a special storage cabinet under his workbench. He doesn't divide in the fall, but puts the cleaned, dry, marked, tubers into regular plastic grocery bags (like the ones from Giant or Wal-Mart!) and covers with dry wood chips. The bags are placed in Rubbermaid tubs, left open, and slid into his cabinet. The cabinet is 8ft long x 4ft high x 3ft wide with ¾" insulation "board" glued to the insides. He heats the box with two 100-watt light bulbs located in the center of the box. The bulbs are connected to an electric baseboard heater thermostat, set at 40 degrees. Tubers are divided and set out in the spring.

This article's author (800) digs, cleans, dries, labels with an "ink in a pencil" marker, then places the undivided tubers in heavy plastic bags and covers with coarse vermiculite. Note: I obtain coarse vermiculite through a local commercial flower grower; they purchase it at Griffin Greenhouse & Nursery Supplies. However, I find cedar wood chips (small animal bedding) work equally well as vermiculite. The bags are labeled with the names of the dahlias they contain. I also have a special room for my tuber storage. It is an 8 ft x10 ft space in my basement next to the outside cellar doors enclosed by "lovely" pink, rigid 2-inch insulation panels. It has shelves and tables to place the bags upon. I found the mid-seventy-degree temperatures of my basement were not conducive to good tuber storage. They often rotted or started growing in the bags. Now my storage area (which I call my panic room) stays in the mid 50-degree range most of the winter. I have an indoor/outdoor thermometer installed in the room so I don't have to open the door often and let warm air in, but I can also make sure the space doesn't freeze. The tubers come out of storage pretty much as they go in — plump and healthy.

Beth MacMillan (15) digs, cleans and dries her tubers in the fall, then puts entire tubers in paper bags which are placed in pots and relocated to a cold cellar. Beth labels the bags with the variety name but has found this unsatisfactory since the bag often disintegrates, losing the name. I had a similar experience one year when I used paper tags to label my tubers. Avoid paper labels!

Lynn Price (150) divides her tubers in the fall, labels them, then places the tubers in postal service boxes, which are also marked with the variety names. Tubers are covered with cedar chips. Lynn owns a beautiful historic home in Chadd's Ford which happens to have a convenient cold cellar. It maintains her tubers in a moist and cool environment. In the spring they are planted directly into the ground.

The person who wins the "Above and Beyond" award for dahlia storage is Sue Bunkin (175). Sue stores her divided, labeled tubers in waxed cardboard boxes lined with open plastic bags and covered with wood shavings, like cedar animal bedding. She then humps them up to her attic where the temperature range is between 45 and 50 degrees. They stay there until March, when it gets too warm

in the attic. Sue then brings the tubers down and they go into an unheated barn, where they remain until she plants them in the spring.

Storing dahlia tubers in Saran wrap is a unique method which works well if you divide the tubers in the fall and don't have large quantities to store. You will find an article with details about this method on the American Dahlia Society website at <http://www.dahlia.org/index.php?page=saran-wrap-tuber-storage> .

It appears that the single most important factor in successfully storing dahlias is the temperature. If it is too cold, tubers can freeze and die. If it's too warm, they will start to grow and rot. Sometimes they will dry out in warm temperatures as well. Ideally 40-50 degrees would be the best temperature range for storage, but temperatures in the 50-degree range seem to work pretty well.

Storage medium doesn't seem absolutely necessary. You may have noticed that a few of our members don't use it. Professional dahlia growers at Connell's in Tacoma, Washington, and Swan Island in Canby, Oregon store their tubers in four-sided wooden pallets without storage medium. Their storage rooms are cool and moist through the winter. Tubers are then divided all through fall and early winter. Personally I would not be comfortable storing my tubers without medium. I get some drying out of the tubers in the top of my bags, perhaps due to the slightly warmer temperatures I maintain.

Spring or fall division of tubers doesn't seem to matter. Dividing in fall saves space in storage. Probably whichever season is convenient for your schedule is the best one.

Perhaps there is some information in this article which would be useful in your dahlia storage system. If a particular procedure interests you, why not contact that GPDS member directly? I'm sure they would be happy to discuss their particular storage method in detail.

Dana Miller
gardenridge@comcast.net