

A Bit About Dahlia Tubers

By Lorelie Merton

Winter is the time for digging, dividing and storing your precious dahlia tubers. Lorelie shares her experience from growing thousands of tubers on her cut-flower farm Florelie at Bungaree, near Ballarat.

Dahlia tubers can be stored in a number of different mediums – potting mix, saw dust, cocopeat (coconut fibre). We have trialled all on our farm and all have worked well. We have settled on storing primarily in compost as we have found it easier to maintain a more consistent moisture level during storage.

What Makes a Good Tuber?

What does a tuber need to grow? It needs to have a body, a neck and an eye. The colour of eyes can vary. They can be red, green, white or purple. Red eyes are more common in varieties which have red or pink flowers. Green eyes are more common in paler flowers like white or yellow.

The neck is often the skinnier part coming out from the central stalk and then the tuber widens into the body. Some tubers don't have much of a neck at all. They don't need a lot of the crown area to develop an eye.



At the end of the body you can often find the root which I call the tail. You don't need the tail for the plant to grow and they often snap or dry out during storage so we cut these off for ease of storage, shipping and planting. Cutting off the tail also allows you to check for any hidden rot that may be in the tuber but not at first apparent.

Tubers come in all shapes and sizes, sometimes they are long and skinny. Other times they are short and fat. The size and shape don't matter.

Learning to spot the eyes is definitely a skill, especially when they're dormant. Often they look like a tiny pimple although if they're very dormant you may not be able to see them. You can try to 'wake up' your tubers by putting them in slightly damp potting mix somewhere warm to encourage them to sprout.

Unlike bulbs, **size DOES NOT matter with dahlia tubers**. In my experience tubers the size of a AAA battery or larger will grow into a full sized, healthy flowering plant in a single

season. I have planted tubers smaller than this with success as well. Dahlias grown from seed, cuttings and tubers will all grow into a full-sized flowering plant in one season. Smaller tubers are actually arguably better as the plant has a smaller amount of reserved energy to rely on in the tuber. It has to establish its own, new root system faster than if it had a large tuber with lots of stored energy. Tubers that establish a root system faster are better equipped to handle fluctuating temperatures and warmer weather. Some growers will intentionally cut off the back half of a large tuber to encourage root growth.

Common Issues

Help! I knocked off the eye/sprout!

It's pretty easy to bump off an eye when handling your tubers but it's nothing to be worried about. The tuber will resprout.

Damaged Neck

The neck of a tuber is pretty important, it's how the energy gets from the body of the tuber up to the eye to allow the plant to grow. Some peeled skin or a small cut in the neck often isn't cause for worry, however if the neck is dried out and you can see the fibres/strings inside the neck it is unlikely to grow.

Mould

Superficial mould on tubers is quite common. Usually this doesn't affect its viability. Often you can just brush or wipe it off. You can also soak tubers briefly in a 10% bleach solution or spray them with vinegar. Just allow them to dry out before re-storing them.

Rot

Rot is usually caused by storing tubers in a medium which is too damp. Some varieties however are just more prone to rot than others no matter what you do.

Desiccation/Drying

Shrivelling, wrinkling and drying of tubers is a sign that the storage medium is too dry. Some drying out of tubers during storage is not uncommon and does not affect growth. We plant a lot of tubers with some degree of shrivelling every year with no issues.

Tubers are living things (even in their dormant stage) and sometimes despite our best attempts they don't grow. If you are ever worried about the quality of tubers you have received contact your seller politely with your concerns. Include photos clearly showing your concerns. Chances are the tubers are not in the same condition as when they packed them.

Tubers often surprise me with their resilience and desire to grow. We plant a number of damaged tubers on the farm each year with no issues.

Happy growing!

Lorelie

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See also the Growing/Digging and Dividing page on the Society's website