

FLORET FARM'S
GROW GREAT DAHLIAS

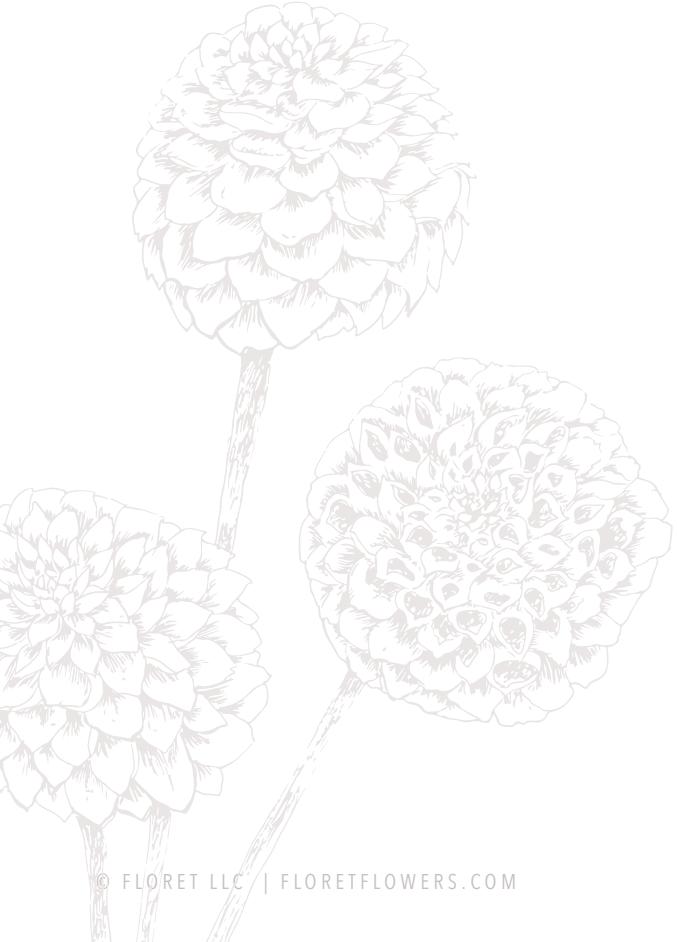


I get asked all of the time what my favorite flower is and answering always feels a little like singling out a favorite child. In truth, I could never really choose a favorite; however, during the late months of summer I always say dahlias. Over the years I have trialed well over 500 varieties, and this year we will be planting between 13,000 and 15,000 dahlia tubers into our field.

It's not hard to see why dahlias are one of the most widely grown and well-loved cut flowers. Their brilliant blooms come in a dazzling rainbow of colors, they flower from mid-summer until the first fall frost and produce both blooms and tubers so abundantly that they always end up getting shared.

Whether you have a small cutting garden or a large flower farm, you'll definitely want to include a few (or a few thousand) of these beautiful, versatile and productive plants. Be warned though, once you've been bitten by the dahlia bug, there's no going back.

We've tried numerous approaches and techniques to grow our dahlia crops over the years. After a lot of trial and error, we've developed a system that works for us in our climate and is based on our farm's production goals. A few things to take into consideration: we have extremely limited acreage, so we choose to grow our plants closer together than you might expect. We also grow all our flowers organically, so I won't be sharing recommendations for toxic fungicides, insecticides or other chemicals. That type of information is readily available elsewhere. Instead, I'll share the organic approach we employ to preventively combat insects and disease.



PREPARING & PLANTING





Before you get started planting any kind of flowers, especially dahlias, it's important that you have your soil tested if you haven't done so already. Your local agriculture extension office should be able to complete a soil test for you for around \$50. Depending on the soil conditions in your garden or farm, you'll likely need to add amendments, as dahlias like nutrient-rich soil.

We grow 90% of our dahlias in the open field. Our little plot is situated on top of a sandbar, literally. If you dig down just a foot you'll find silver beach sand, so we rely heavily on high quality compost for fertility and a thick layer of mulch (grass clippings, leaves, straw) to help retain moisture throughout the driest parts of the summer.

Prior to planting, we amend our beds with 2-3 inches (5-7.5 cm) of compost, rock phosphate, lime and a general organic fertilizer (Nature's Intent 7-2-4). This mix is tilled into the soil and then tubers are planted roughly one foot (0.3 meters) apart down the row, with two rows per bed. Dahlias need a lot of water

throughout the season, so we run three lines of drip irrigation per row and then mulch over the top of it with a thick layer of leaves or dry grass clippings to help keep the water from evaporating. While this process is labor intensive on the front end, once the tubers are planted, and provided drip irrigation and mulch, we do very little to them for the remainder of the season.

We generally begin planting tubers in the field about two weeks after our last spring frost date (around April 25th) with the process consuming the early part of May. To plant, dig a hole 4-6 inches (10-15 cm) deep and place the tuber on its side, horizontally with the growing eye facing up. Once in place, refill the hole with soil. Dahlias should not be watered until you see the first green shoots poking through the ground. Overwatering before shoots are visible can lead to tuber rot. When the weather warms and sprouts begin to emerge from the soil, we go through the planting beds and pull the mulch away from touching the newly emerging shoots so they get plenty of sunlight.





GROWING & CARING FOR PLANTS



Once the plants are between 8-12 inches (20-30 cm) tall, we give them a hard pinch (snip the top 3-4 inches [7.5-10 cm] of the central shoot or terminal bud just above a set of leaves) which encourages low basal branching, increased stem count and longer overall stem length.

The process of pinching can often feel counterintuitive, but by pinching back the main stems, you're telling the plant to start producing more branches at the base versus up in the canopy, resulting in many more usable flower stems over the course of the season. Pinching also helps to prevent the plant from creating extra-large, hollow stems. If left to grow normally, dahlia stems can grow as thick as a broom handle which is not ideal for tucking into an arrangement.

Throughout the early months of summer, we apply compost tea to the young plants every week. We brew our own tea which is a type of homemade liquid fertilizer that is sprayed onto the plants as a foliar feed. We like to add kelp and fish emulsion to the mix in order to promote strong plant growth and help combat disease. In the early years, powdery mildew often plagued our dahlias but after adopting a strict compost tea regimen and repositioning our field rows to line up

with the direction of prevailing winds to increase air flow between our rows, we've had very little issue with powdery mildew.

Insect pressure varies from season to season. Some years aphids come in abundance, while in other years thrips are a big issue. Earwigs are my personal nemesis; they always seem to be lurking, ready to chomp our perfect blooms. We've found that the healthier the plants, the less insect and disease pressure we experience, so we do a lot of work to keep plants healthy and well-watered throughout the season. Just like the human body, the stronger our immune system, the less likely we are to get sick. For earwigs we sprinkle Sluggo Plus around the plants. This product is certified organic and is safe to be used around children and pets.

In really extreme cases of aphids, we have resorted to a few applications of insecticidal soap to knock back the population. Safer brand makes an organically approved concentrate that you can find at most garden and hardware stores. Due to the pervasiveness of Western flower thrips here in Washington, we are exploring using beneficial nematodes to help keep the thrips population in check.



STAKING

After giving plants lots of love and organic fertilizer, they will inevitably grow nice and tall. Big, healthy dahlias require sturdy staking and we employ a method of corraling our plants with twine and metal posts. We pound a metal T-post every ten feet (3 meters) along the outside edge of the beds and then string a double layer of bailing twine (spaced about 18 inches / 0.5 meters apart) from post to post in order to support the dahlias. In past seasons we've tried using Tenax Hortonova

flower netting stretched horizontally between posts, but found that removing it at the end of the season was such a nightmare that we have switched over to the corral method exclusively.

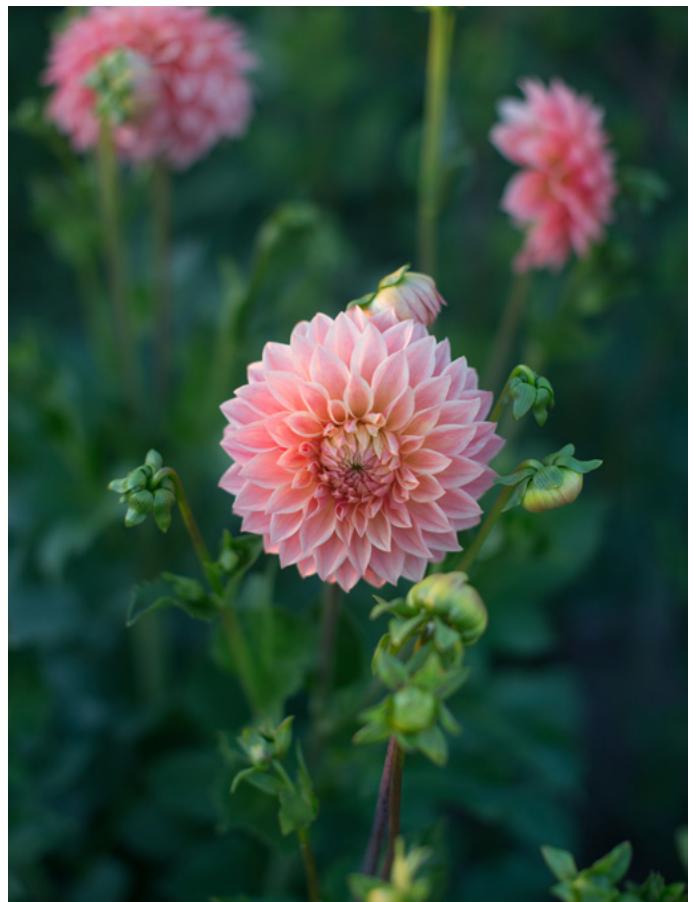
For home gardeners, with only a few plants, place a tall, sturdy post next to the tubers at planting time so you can tie stems to them as they grow.



GROWING UNDER COVER

For big, fluffy, fragile blooms like those in the dinnerplate dahlia category, we grow ours under cover in the hoop houses (unheated greenhouses). This strategy has made a world of difference in both productivity and stem length, plus flower quality has been dramatically improved since the heavy blooms don't get soaked by rain. We don't supply any supplemental heat, but with the extra insulation provided by the hoop house, we are able to plant

tubers by mid-March, roughly 5 weeks ahead of our field plantings. Extra-large, delicate varieties like the coveted Café au Lait dahlia definitely benefit from being protected from the wind and rain. Inside the cozy, sheltered space, our dahlias easily grow to be over 7 feet (2 meters) tall! In the hoops, we use the same coralling method, but employ taller T-posts and an additional layer of twine.



HARVESTING

While dahlias are not a terribly long lasting cut flower, their brilliant colorful blooms make up for their fleeting existence. The trick for longest vase life is keeping them well hydrated and harvesting them at the proper stage. Harvest blooms when the flower buds are not too tight since dahlias don't unfurl much after they've been harvested. Also, don't wait until the bloom is too ripe since they'll shatter and drop their petals quickly if past their prime. Check the back of each flower head, looking for firm and lush petals; papery or slightly dehydrated ones signal old age.

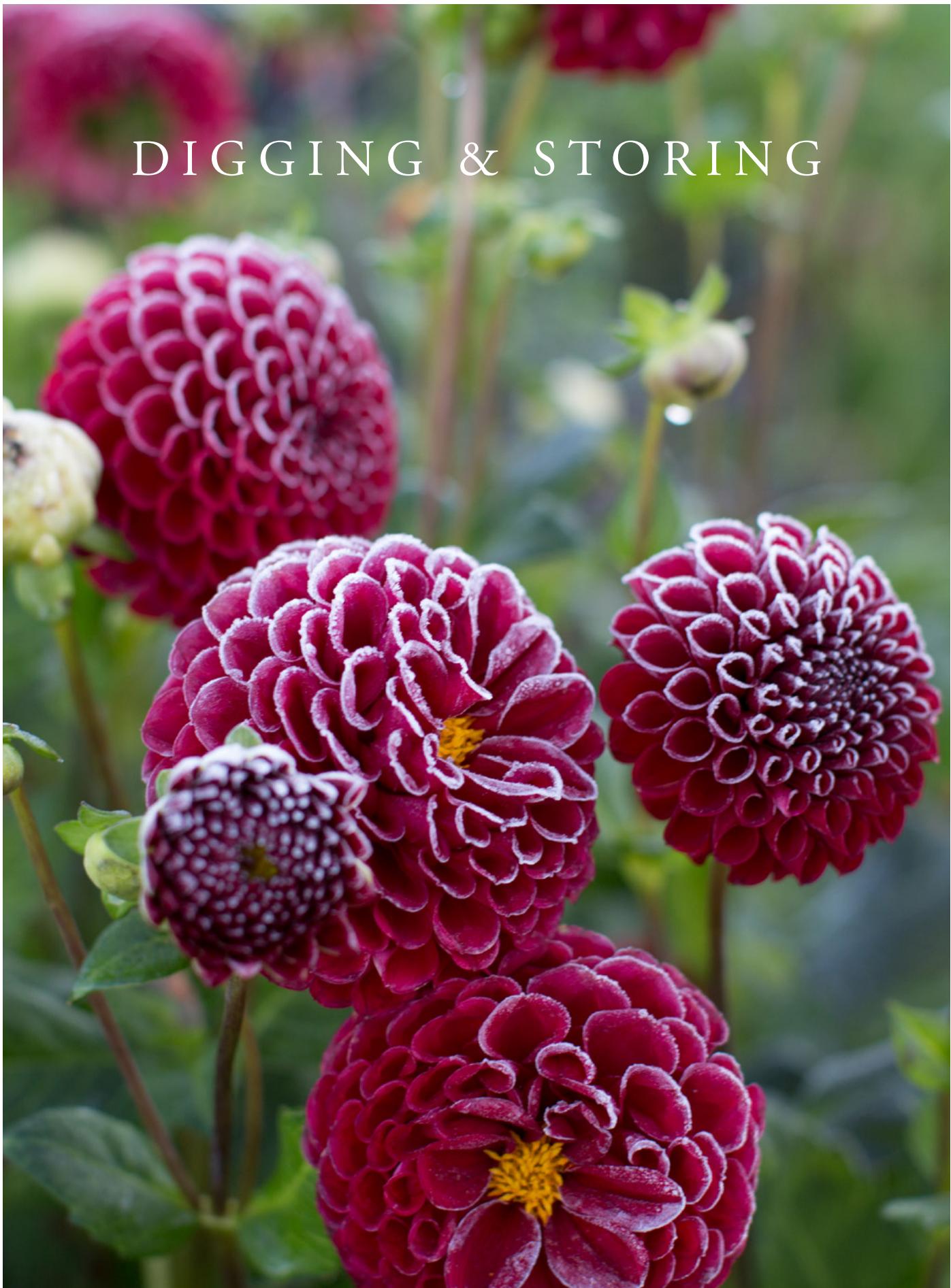
To ensure proper stage of harvest on a larger scale, we harvest our dahlia patch every three days, rain or shine, and never leave a single ripe flower on the plant. This protocol ensures that every harvest day is efficient because we aren't examining individual blooms for signs of over ripeness. In the early years, when we skipped a harvest we ended up spending twice the amount of time in the patch sorting and grading flowers, a headache and a ton of wasted time.

The three day rule changed everything, allowing our harvest crew to comb the patch quickly and efficiently since every bloom was at the perfect stage.

Once dahlias are harvested, it's important to get them into water right away. We place freshly picked flowers into water with floral preservative and then tuck them into our cooler for at least 12-24 hours before heading out to our customers. This approach gives us a solid week of vase life, and we're consistently told by our clients that our dahlias last longer than any others they've purchased.

For home gardeners simply wanting to enjoy fresh-cut dahlias on the dinner table, floral preservative and cooler time aren't necessary. You can ensure that your blooms will stay well hydrated by placing the bottom 2 to 3 inches (5 to 7.5 cm) of stem into 160 to 180°F (71 to 82°C) water, allowing the water to cool to room temperature before taking the flowers out.

DIGGING & STORING





The first autumn frost brings dahlia season to a screeching halt. It's always a bittersweet time of year for me, watching the field go from a sea of blooms to frost-blackened plants overnight. At the same time, I'm often secretly relieved because it also signals an end to the long and tiring flower season. But before I can settle into my winter hibernation routine, the last big task on the farm must take place – digging up all the dahlia tubers.

After a few hard frosts, typically early November here in Washington, we start the process of digging tubers. I know many larger dahlia growers who are able to employ the help of machinery for this back breaking process, but at our farm the whole thing is done by hand, one clump at a time.

Before digging up any tubers, we remove all of the T-posts, string and drip irrigation, and then we cut the plants back to the ground. For lifting tubers, we use pitchforks instead of shovels since they allow the dirt to fall away from the clumps more easily.

After digging up the dahlia clumps, we shake off the excess dirt, snuggle them into deep bulb crates and stack them in a 40-50°F (5-10°C) room in our basement until we have time to divide. The light layer of soil keeps the tubers hydrated enough to avoid shriveling in storage.

DIVIDING



When it's time to divide, we rinse tuber clumps thoroughly with a high pressure stream of water from the hose and then set them out to drip dry.

To divide tuber clumps you'll need some sharp pruners, good lighting and a heavy duty pair of loppers. Begin by splitting the large clump in half with either loppers or sharp pruners which will leave you with smaller, more workable pieces.



The halved clumps are then divided into individual tubers. In order to have a viable tuber, it is essential that the eye (swollen growing node) and neck are left unharmed. If you accidentally break the neck, just toss the tuber. I've tried to save many in my day, but they always end up rotting so it's better to be ruthless on the front end.



If we have plenty of a particular variety, we like to leave two or three tubers connected together versus cutting down to just one individual tuber because it seems to help the main neck stay sturdy and gives the plants a faster boost in the spring. With a little practice and a lot of patience, it gets pretty easy to spot eyes and separate tubers with accuracy and speed.





After dividing, let the tubers completely dry, label them and then pack them up for storage if you are not ready to plant them yet. We use bins lined with plastic filled with vermiculite on the farm. We pour a little vermiculite in the bottom of the bin, then place a layer of tubers on top, pour more vermiculite in, add another layer and continue until the bin is full. If you grow on a small scale, you can also wrap individual tubers in Saran Wrap and store them in boxes. Whichever storage method you choose, be sure to keep tubers in a cool, dark area with a temperature of 40-50°F (5-10°C) such as a basement for the winter. Check them monthly and toss any that show signs of rot.

Getting your mother stock of dahlias started is often a bit of a financial investment, but once you have a good base, each tuber will produce 5-20 more tubers by season's end. You'll be swimming in a sea of flowers and excess tubers in no time.

So, whether you grow dahlias for pleasure or profit, consider including these beautiful and bountiful flowers in your planting plans for the coming season. During the months of August and September, there's nothing more spectacular than a patch of brilliantly colored dahlias in full, rolling bloom.



TWELVE EASY TO GROW DAHLIAS



CAMANO BUZ

A new favorite and one of the best orange varieties we've ever grown. Plants are smothered in warm orange blooms all season long. Strong stems are great for cutting and the perfect size for bouquets.



CORNEL

One of the most productive and reliable varieties we've ever grown, 'Cornel' makes our top 5 list every year. Plants reach 4 feet (1.2 m) tall and produce long, strong stems perfect for cutting. Blooms are 4 inches (10 cm) across and feature dark, cherry-red petals that resemble rich velvet.



INTRIGUE

This formal decorative is one of the first dahlia varieties to flower each season. Blooms are 4 inches (10 cm) across and start out as a brilliant coral that fades to rich raspberry. Prolific, long-lasting, and loved by all our market customers, 'Intrigue' is a must grow.



JOMANDA

One of the most productive varieties we grow, 'Jomanda' is a rich, rusty orange with contrasting dark stems. Ball-shaped, 4 inch (10 cm) blooms are both beautiful and long-lasting, making them a favorite with our market customers. A must grow!



JOWEY WINNIE

If 'Bracken Rose' had a big sister, this beauty would be her. Their coloring is so similar, but 'Jowey Winnie' has a warm peach undertone whereas 'Bracken Rose' is more of a cool rosy pink. The vigorous, healthy plants churn out armloads of large, ball-shaped, dusty-rose flowers all season long.



MAARN

A huge hit with our market customers, 'Maarn' features bright, cheerful orange 4 inch (10 cm) ball-shaped flowers. The extremely productive plants reach 5 feet (1.5 m) tall and churn out an abundance of pumpkin toned flowers all season long. If you're looking for a great orange addition, this is a must grow.

TWELVE EASY TO GROW DAHLIAS



SNOHO DORIS

Award-winning and one of our top 5 favorites, 'Snoho Doris' is a vigorous upright grower, with long strong stems and ball-shaped, virtually weather proof flowers. A favorite with designers and market customers, its 4-5 inch (10-13 cm) blooms are a beautiful mix of coral, peach, and apricot.

SNOHO JOJO

This beautiful peachy-bronze ball is as productive as it is pretty. Plants boast excellent disease resistance and vigorous upright growth, churning out an abundance of long-stemmed flowers all season long.

SUNCREST

After trialing dozens of yellow varieties over the years, this beauty is still a top favorite. Soft canary-yellow, 4 inch (10 cm) ball-shaped blooms have a faint peachy-pink blush on the petal tips. 'Suncrest' is very productive and boasts long lasting, weather resistant flowers, making it perfect for market sales.



TAHOMA APRIL

This garden workhorse churns out an abundance of long, strong stemmed, dark pink flowers all season. The 4 foot (1.2 m) tall plants are both healthy and productive and produce long lasting cut flowers.

VALLEY RUST BUCKET

This spectacular garden workhorse was lovingly bred by Leone and David Smith and is a must grow. The 3 inch (7.5 cm) miniature ball shaped flowers of 'Valley Rust Bucket' are a deep rusty red-orange blend that is a favorite among our market customers and everyone who visits the garden.

WILLOWFIELD MATHEW

One of the best lilac-rose varieties we've grown, this tall, ultra-productive beauty produces an abundance of long, strong stems and medium-sized, ball-shaped flowers all season long. One of the earliest varieties to flower, this gem is a real workhorse. A must grow!

TWELVE MOST POPULAR DAHLIAS FOR WEDDINGS



BREAKOUT

One of the loveliest varieties we have ever grown, this large-flowered treasure produces an abundance of 8-10 inch (20-25 cm) soft watermelon colored blooms brushed with buttercream on long, strong stems. If 'Café au Lait' had a sister, it would surely be 'Breakout'.



CAFÉ AU LAIT

Our number one most requested variety! Every year we double our patch and always agree that we should have planted more. The massive informal decorative dinner plate-sized blooms resemble pastel silk pillows.



CHILSON'S PRIDE

This darling features soft pink flowers with pale creamy centers that smother plants all season long. Petal tips are slightly fringed providing extra dimension. Both color and size make it ideal for wedding work and a great all around cut flower.



CRICHTON HONEY

With warm, peachy-apricot blooms that look as if they are glowing, 'Crichton Honey' is a favorite with designers and market customers. Ball-shaped, 4 inch (10 cm) blooms are very weather resistant.



FRENCH DOLL

A favorite with everyone who visits the garden, this beauty lives up to her name. Beautiful peach flowers have a soft yellow center. Flowers look as if they are glowing in the garden. Tall strong stems make them excellent for cutting.



GERRIE HOEK

It's no wonder why this old fashioned favorite is still so widely grown. Plants are smothered in pretty soft pink blooms. The upward facing flowers and strong stems make them ideal for cutting and arranging.

TWELVE MOST POPULAR DAHLIAS FOR WEDDINGS



JOWEY NICKY

One of the most popular varieties with floral designers, this soft peach treasure churns out an abundance of ball shaped flowers all season long. Ideal for wedding work and flower arranging, 'Jowey Nicky' is a must grow!



JOWEY WINNIE

The vigorous, healthy plants churn out armloads of large, ball-shaped, dusty-rose flowers all season long. Their long, strong stems make them ideal for cutting. A must have for flower arrangers and wedding florists.



L'ANCRELLE

One of the very best white balls on the market, this snowy treasure churns out perfect flowers all season long. Its long, strong stems make it an excellent cut flower. Great for wedding work and hand tied bouquets.



OTTO'S THRILL

This giant rosy-pink treasure is a huge hit with everyone who visits our garden, especially wedding florists. If you're looking for a winning addition to your dinnerplate dahlia collection, then look no further.



PEACHES N' CREAM

One of the most unique color patterns, each petal on this 5 inch (13 cm) formal decorative bloomer is a warm peachy-orange that fades to white at the tip. The effect is absolutely stunning and makes it one of the most popular varieties in our garden. A must grow!



SWEET NATHALIE

One of the most beautiful varieties we've ever grown. Medium sized plants are smothered in pale blush blooms all season. Long, strong stems make this a great cut flower. Perfect for wedding work, they pair beautifully with Café au Lait.