



CLASSIFICATION OF DAHLIAS

DAHLIAS ARE AVAILABLE in a multitude of sizes, forms, and colors. In fact, one of the alluring characteristics of dahlias is the huge range of bloom sizes and types, from the tiny two-inch (or less) pompons to the huge sixteen-inch giants.

A detailed classification system is used by the American Dahlia Society to catalog the thousands of varieties that now exist – and the new ones developed each year. The American Dahlia Society annually publishes the *Classification and Handbook of Dahlias*, which lists thousands of dahlia varieties, the latest form definitions, and other valuable information.

FORM

Dahlias are classified partially by their shape or form. There are dahlias which are **fully double** with the central rays (petals) spirally displayed, such as the formal decorative, informal decorative semi-cactus, cactus, incurved cactus, laciniated, ball, miniature ball, pompon, waterlily, and stellar types.

Then there are dahlias which are referred to as **open centered**. Those include the peony, anemone, collarette, orchid, orchette, single, and mignon single.

There are also dahlias classified as novelty, which means they have a form that doesn't fit any of the other classifications.

The mature petals which determine the size of the dahlia also determine the dahlia formation. The letter(s) in parentheses after each form name below is its official abbreviation.

Here are the descriptions of the dahlia forms currently recognized by the American Dahlia Society. *By the book* definitions are basically as described in the official dahlia literature; *notes* are included to help translate the jargon.

The latest form descriptions and lists of currently exhibited varieties are available in the *Classification and Handbook of Dahlias*. This reference guide is published yearly by the American Dahlia Society and can be purchased online at dahlia.org.

FORMAL DECORATIVE (FD)



Clearview Jennae

By the book: Ray florets (petals) flat, partially revolute, or partially involute. Petals uniform and regularly arranged, tending to recurve toward the stem.

Notes: The petals should be arranged “like shingles on a roof.” Good formal decoratives these days have petals that close (recurve) completely to the stem. A problem with some FDs is a tendency to have petals that are so involute that they border on ball formation.

INFORMAL DECORATIVE (ID)



AC Casper

By the book: Ray florets twisted, curled, or wavy, imparting a petal which is not flat. Petals may be partially revolute with their arrangement irregular.

Notes: The distinction between this type and semi-cactus and formal decoratives is sometimes hazy. Classic informal decs have a general wavy or twisted overall look. Some varieties vary between ID and SC depending on growing conditions.

SEMI-CACTUS (SC)



Clearview Edie

By the book: Ray florets broad at the base, straight, incurved, or recurved; ray florets revolute for up to one-half their length.

Notes: Many varieties border on semi-cactus and informal decorative form; others border on semi-cactus and straight cactus form. The key is to observe if the petals are revolute for one-half their length or **less**. Form is determined by ray florets (petals) at the equator of blooms.

STRAIGHT CACTUS (C)



Aitara Caress

By the book: Ray florets revolute for more than one-half their length; pointed, straight, or recurved, radiating in all directions from the center.

Notes: Look at the backs of the petals – most should be revolute for **more** than one-half their length. Varieties that can’t make up their minds whether they’re semi-cactus or cactus do not have much success at dahlia exhibitions.

INCURVED CACTUS (IC)



Romance

By the book: Ray florets revolute for more than one-half their length; pointed, with pronounced curvature of petals toward the center of the flower head.

Notes: Easily one of the most recognizable forms are these “spider dahlias” your grandmother talked about. They have the same petal formation as straight cactus dahlias, but the petals curve in toward the center. Rare in the larger bloom sizes.

LACINIATED (LC)



Jennie

By the book: The split or laciniation should be in proportion to the ray floret length. There should be an overall twisting in the area of the split to give an overall fringed effect.

Notes: Laciniated dahlias are not dahlias with little notches on the ends of the petals. Look for **splits** and twisting on the ends of the petals, not just notches. Each petal typically ends in three points.

BALL (BA)



Clearview Daniel

By the book: Fully double flowers, ball shaped, ray florets blunt, rounded, or indented, involute most of their length, fully involute for about one-half their length, normally displayed in a spiral.

Notes: The key for a good ball dahlia is that the petals are **fully** involute for half their length. There are some formal decorative dahlias masquerading as ball dahlias. Good ball dahlias are “tightly quilled” and may exhibit a honeycomb pattern.

MINIATURE BALL (MB)



Ms Kennedy

By the book: Same as ball dahlias, differing only in size.

Notes: Ball dahlias (previous definition) must be over 3½ inches in diameter. Miniature ball dahlias are over 2 inches but under 3½ inches in diameter. They all have the same petal formation (involute for more than half their length). Good exhibition varieties reflex completely to the stem.

POMPON (P)



By the book: Fully double flowers similar to ball dahlias but more globular and smaller in size; the ray florets are partially involute for the whole of their length and fully involute for more than half their length.

Notes: These really are just smaller miniature ball dahlias – up to two inches in diameter. The good exhibition varieties are very tightly quilled and recurve completely to the stem.

Irish D Porter

STELLAR (ST)



By the book: Petals break gradually from immature to fully developed outer petals. Those on the outside should be narrow and involute with a slight recurve to the stem. The less mature petals should be narrow and partially revolute.

Notes: Petals need not be as closely packed as on formal or informal decorative types; thus “negative space” is acceptable. Look for petals shaped like roof gutters.

Alloway Candy

WATERLILY (WL)



By the book: Blooms are fully double. A side view should be like a saucer. The center should be closed and dome shaped, breaking gradually to four to seven rows of florets. Outer florets are broad and slightly cupped.

Notes: It should look like it would be at home floating on the water. Some waterlily dahlias have too many rows of petals, thus are not true to form and not good for exhibition.

Carmen Bunky

PEONY (PE)



By the book: Open-centered dahlias with two or more rows of ray florets surrounding the disc flowers. Ray florets adjacent to the disc flowers may be smaller, twisted, and/or curled.

Notes: It's those twisted little petals near the center that give exhibitors the most grief. They're supposed to be there, but inexperienced and/or uninformed judges score them down anyway. This type was probably among the first dahlias imported into Europe over 200 years ago.

Lake Hills Creamsicle

ANEMONE (AN)



By the book: Dahlias with one or more rows of ray florets surrounding a center of elongated tubular disc florets. The disc florets should be fully developed and present a domed, pincushion effect.

Notes: These are easy to distinguish – they’re just a pincushion surrounded by a row or more of regular petals (ray florets). The outer ray florets should be visible and “frame” the center florets (pincushion).

Sandia Panama

COLLARETTE (CO)



By the book: Open-centered with a single row of uniform, evenly spaced compound ray florets. The petaloids surrounding the disc should be approximately $\frac{1}{2}$ to $\frac{2}{3}$ the length of the ray florets.

Notes: The petaloid is actually part of the regular petal – pull one apart and you’ll see. The petaloid is sometimes a lighter color. Good exhibition collarettes have rounded petals that are flat or slightly cupped arranged in a flat plane.

Kelsey Annie Joy

ORCHID (O)



By the book: Open-centered with a single row of uniform, evenly spaced petals in a flat plane surrounding the disc. The petals are involute for two thirds or more of their length and fully involute for at least one-third of their length.

Notes: There are some orchids on the market that lack the requisite inward curl (involute). They are not good singles or good orchids. Many new, top-quality orchids are now available.

Midnight Star

ORCHETTE (OT)



By the book: Blooms combine the involute characteristics of the orchid and petaloid characteristics of the collarette. Petals should be straight and involute for at least $\frac{1}{4}$ their length; petaloids should be discernable from arm’s length.

Notes: This relatively new form is quickly evolving. Look for petaloids that are visible and neat but don’t pooch out in an unsightly mess.

Fancy Pants

SINGLE (S)



By the book: Open-centered dahlias with a single row of uniform, evenly spaced ray florets in a flat plane surrounding the disc flower.

Notes: These have been ignored by seedling growers to such an extent that there are few top-quality single varieties on the market – but that is changing. The petals must be in a flat plane.

Kelsey Kristie

MIGNON SINGLE (MS)



By the book: The same as single dahlias except with the diameter only up to two inches.

Notes: These elegant little blooms typically grow on plants about 18 inches tall. They make great borders and can be grown successfully in pots. The blooms must not be over two inches in diameter; anything larger is automatically classified as a single. Like singles, the petals should be evenly spaced and on a flat plane.

Kelsey Dwarf

NOVELTY (NO or NX)



By the book: Dahlias with characteristics differing from the present classification. They can be classified as novelty open (NO) or novelty fully double (NX).

Notes: This bloom is a novelty since the petal formation is that of an orchid but has multiple rows of petals. There is no classification for a double orchid. Many varieties masquerading as novelties simply have poor form and could not win if classified correctly. Their hybridizers have worked hard to get them classified as novelties in the hope they might win something.

Irish Trophy

MICRO DAHLIAS (M)



By the book: Dahlias with a recognized form but only up to two inches in diameter.

Notes: Recently recognized by the American Dahlia Society, these little blooms come in many forms, but currently only micro collarettes and micro peonies have enough varieties to warrant their own sections in dahlia shows. Many are excellent for borders and containers. Bloom pictured is a micro collarette only two inches in diameter.

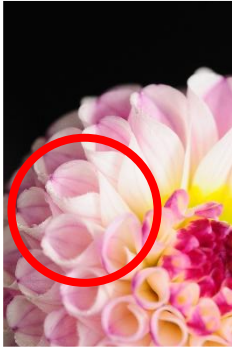
Kelsey Bramble

PETAL FORMATION

Dahlia form definitions often refer to petal formation. For instance, the definition for formal decorative dahlias indicated that the petals should be flat, partially revolute, or partially involute.

Unfortunately, it isn't always apparent just what those definitions mean. To demystify this aspect of dahlia classification, here are definitions for four important petal characteristics accompanied by clarifying illustrations.

Involute: the edges of the petals roll **forward** along the edge. When fully involute the edges touch or overlap so only the reverse of the petal is visible. Ball, miniature ball, and pompon dahlias are some with involute petals. The bloom pictured is a miniature ball variety.



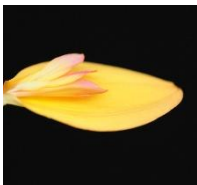
Revolute: The edges of the dahlia petals roll **backward** along the edge. When fully revolute they roll so much the edges of the petals touch. Revolute petals are always found on cactus and semi-cactus dahlias (and on some others).



Lacinated: the petals are split at the tips. There is a twisting in the area of the split giving an overall fringed effect. The best lacinated dahlias have significant splits at the tips of the petals, not just small notches.



Collarette: the petals are actually compound. While a cursory examination of a collarette dahlia may lead one to believe there are 2 rows of petals, the opposite is true. The "collar" is an integral part of each petal.



SIZE

In addition to form, dahlias are also classified by size. Each dahlia size (determined by bloom diameter in inches) is given a letter code, such as AA for the largest ones, and MS (Mignon Single) for the smallest. The size classifications are:

AA (Giant).....	over 10 inches in diameter
A (Large)	over 8 and up to 10 inches in diameter
B (Medium)	over 6 and up to 8 inches in diameter
BB (Small)	over 4 and up to 6 inches in diameter
M (Miniature).....	up to 4 inches in diameter
BA (Ball).....	over 3½ inches in diameter
MB (Miniature Ball).....	over 2 and up to 3½ inches in diameter
P (Pompon)	up to 2 inches in diameter
S (Single).....	over 2 inches in diameter
MS (Mignon Single).....	up to 2 inches in diameter

COLOR

For purposes of dahlia classification all colors, shades tints, tones, and combinations thereof, known to be found in cultivated forms of dahlias have been grouped into the fifteen color groups listed below.

Classification is determined by the predominant color or colors appearing on the face of the petals. Classification by color of open-centered dahlias is determined by the predominant color appearing on the face of the petals except for orchid and orchettes varieties which are classified by the color on the reverse of the petals.

The official color guide for dahlia classification is the American Dahlia Society (ADS) color chart, published in 2004. The color guide can be purchased online from the American Dahlia Society at dahlia.org.

Here are the 15 recognized color groups, their abbreviations, and (when needed), an explanation.

White (W)	Yellow (Y)
Orange (OR)	Pink (PK)
Dark Pink (DP)	Red (R)
Dark Red (DR)	Lavender (L)
Purple (PR)	Bronze (BR)

Light Blend (LB) Blends of the lighter tints and tones of pink, yellow, lavender, and other pastels; also two-toned varieties of pastel tints and tones in which the central rays are of a different color than the marginal rays.

Flame (FL) Blends of the light and high brilliance shades of red and yellow.

Dark Blend (DB) Blends of low brilliance and any of the dark reds or purples with contrasting color or colors.

Variegated (V) Two or more distinct colors on the face of the ray florets (petals), the variegating color arranged in dots, flecks, splashes, stripes, or narrow lines which contrast with the basic color.

Bicolor (BI) Two distinctly clear and sharply separated colors on the face of the ray florets.

USING THE CLASSIFICATION SYSTEM

Assume you were exploring an online catalog from a commercial grower. In it you find a dahlia cultivar named Jennie which is listed as a B LC LB W/L. You may be attracted to the flower because your favorite aunt is named Jennie. However, you would like to know what it looks like. Using the abbreviated information from the catalog you would determine that it is a B size dahlia (between 6 and 8 inches in diameter), has laciniated form (split petals giving a frilled effect), and the color is a light blend mixture of white and lavender. The classification system is fairly simple and very useful when going through dahlia catalogs.

The dahlia pictured here is the popular NARROWS TRICIA (B SC Y). Let's evaluate the classification:



- B indicates the size: over 6 inches up to 8 inches in diameter
- SC indicates the form: semi-cactus
- Y indicates the color: yellow

Note: semi-cactus dahlias have revolute petals that fold back along their axis.

