

A year later the Humboldt seeds were distributed in France and sent to Dresden and Berlin. These clearly came from a different genetic background than the three varieties that Cavanilles had classified. Quickly the color range expanded to dark red, yellow and even white flowers; hybridization efforts also yielded semi-double forms. As the distribution of dahlias throughout Europe intensified, new varieties were introduced. In 1809, shortly before his death, Willdenow returned to the topic in his well-known *Hortus Berlinensis VIII*. Willdenow analyzed the three Spanish dahlias and determined that *D. rosea* and *D. pinnata* (he called it *purpurea*) were essentially similar. Alluding to their vexing flowering habits, he combined these subspecies under the descriptor *Georgina variabilis*. Yet *G. coccinea* was found to be distinct, and so retained its appellation. He then added the new varieties *G. lilacina* and *pallida*. The former may have been a variant of *rosea*, while the latter points to the emergence of whitish flower forms.

De Candolle added to the name confusion in 1810: Although by then well aware that Willdenow's assumption was in error, his *Note sur les Georgina* (published in the Annals of the French Natural History Museum) affirms the accuracy of the German botanist's observation. Nevertheless, the editors of the journal objected: In a side note they referred to the general acceptance in France and elsewhere of 'dahlia' as the proper name. No matter - for at least the next hundred years, most Central and all Eastern Europeans continued to use *georgina*. This disparity led some to conclude that *georginas* were only distantly related to dahlias. More recently, German raisers used the term to describe old hybrids, specifically ball-flowering varieties.

OTTO'S THRILL

The *Garteninspektor* of the Royal Botanic Garden in Berlin-Schöneberg was well acquainted with dahlias. Christoph Friedrich Otto may have been hazy about when he first saw a dahlia - writing thirty years later he claimed to have seen a *D. pallida* in 1800 and a *D. purpurea* in 1802 - but his aim was quite clear. He detected in the new arrivals some real potential for systematic hybridization. Barely twenty, the gardener went to work. The plants were given appropriate care, with his director Willdenow personally handling cultivation. Otto is said to have sent dahlia seeds to England when the initial planting there failed in 1804. He also initiated distribution of dahlias to court and botanical gardens in Jena and Leipzig (1805), and later also to Karlsruhe and Erfurt (1812).

Hybridization attempts produced their first reported successes in these years. The Leipzig court gardener E. A. Breiter announced that "he was very much involved in the cultivation of a plant . . . that was at present quite costly . . . but one that soon would be a very valuable commodity." By 1806, he could claim 103 varieties. He gave these seedlings Latin names based on their flower color, had a catalog printed, and proceeded to sell all the dahlias he could handle after receiving orders "from all provinces of Germany, France, well even from Russia, Poland and Denmark.", according to W. Gerhard in his 1836 publication *Zur Geschichte, Cultur und Classification der Georginen oder Dahlien*.

Concerted efforts to create new forms by Otto and other German raisers quickly bore fruit. *Garteninspektor* Hartwig of Karlsruhe reported in 1808 that he had raised the first fully double dahlia. Its ball-shaped appearance led to considerable excitement in the gardening community. Breiter followed several years later with a lavender ball dahlia, which he used as seed parent for 600 seedlings. Already then the rigorous breeding for specific traits was a preferred approach: ". . . after several years his collection amounted to 300 varieties. He allowed the roots of single-flowering dahlias to freeze and rot, in spite of their often sporting the most glorious colors." During that time Otto received species dahlia seeds directly from Mexico from a German émigré, a Dr. Schiede. One of these, *D. scapigera*, still bears the suffix "Otto et Dietrich". Von Humboldt also continued sending plant material from Paris to Germany. In 1808 a collection was delivered to Duke Carl August in Weimar who ordered these planted in the Belvedere castle garden under the supervision of none other than J. W. v. Goethe. Dahlias were among the arrivals - and the world famous poet and playwright may have been the first victim of incurable dahlia fever.

After Willdenow's death in 1812, Otto became garden director for several years. His determined effort to maximize the dahlia's potential would mark the rest of his life. He felt that it was the duty of botanical gardens to encourage the interest in horticulture by providing the loveliest of new plants to the public. It must be understood that the German dahlia scene by far outdistanced developments in France and in England during that time. Apart from the several locations noted above, dahlias also were raised in quantity in Altenburg, Potsdam, Kassel, and (most significantly) Köstritz.



1804 German magazine presents species

DEEGEN'S FORTUNE

It was a small Thuringian town that would become the center of dahlia culture in Europe, largely due to the contributions of a young Prussian bureaucrat who threw over a promising career to become Germany's most influential dahlia personality. Christian Deegen (1797-1888) founded a dahlia dynasty in Köstritz that remains unrivaled to this day. While his own nursery no longer exists, no fewer than thirteen nurseries call Bad Köstritz home, among them major growers such as Schade (formerly Sieckmann) and Panzer.

Deegen's father thought that Christian would do well to become a tailor. However, the youngster enjoyed nature and abhorred a profession that would keep him cooped up indoors. He loved flowers above all and soon began collecting for his herbarium and learning to propagate plants. When Belvedere garden director Sckell turned over some dahlia roots from his stock to the 15-year old, he thought he had just encouraged the lad to consider hobby gardening. Christian Deegen did more than that. He entered the Prussian administration in his home town Kahla; this would give him ample opportunity to follow his passion. In 1816, Breiter of Leipzig provided Deegen with his lavender double dahlia FORMOSA. The following season, he raised fully double seedlings (along with some peony dahlias). Another year later, he produced a pure white and a pure yellow single - illustrating a major progress for a young dahlia grower.



Then he hit the jackpot - literally! Deegen won a major lottery prize and found himself at a crossroads: stay with the administration or follow his heart? The heart won out in the end: He left civil service, married, and in 1824 purchased the palais at Köstritz from a bankrupt count to pursue commercial dahlia growing. He started with 20 fully double varieties; a couple of years later, Deegen published his first catalogue. His nursery also sought out early-flowering varieties with an abundance of blooms and crossed plants for stronger, longer stems. One of his last, and most enduring, introductions was the flame ball KAISER WILHELM.

In 1836, Christian Deegen's success begat competition: That year, another formidable dahlia raiser opened a nursery in Köstritz. Johann Sieckmann was head gardener at the Reuß estate in Köstritz, where dahlias had been raised as early as 1810. Encouraged by the flourishing trade in dahlia novelties, he quit his post to specialize in hybridizing some of the 200 varieties in his collection.

That year also marked the first dahlia exhibition in Germany. Held in nearby Jena during a medical and scientific convention, the show - organized by Christian Deegen - displayed 6,000 dahlias and more than 200 varieties. One of the introductions was ALEXANDER VON HUMBOLDT, a dark red decorative. The dahlia's namesake was present at its christening. Having recently returned from an expedition that (coincidentally) retraced some of Georgi's route through Russia's far reaches, v. Humboldt expressed his pleasure at the success of the "simple georgina's transformation from species to prized garden flower." For the dahlia, it was a journey of a different dimension.

THE LADY IS NO TRAMP

Forget what you have heard about the British rescue of dahlias from certain oblivion in Spanish hands. Cast aside the assertions that as early as 1789 the tenders of Kew Gardens had mercy on the dahlia (but just didn't understand the enclosed growing instructions for the tender exotic). Give credit to serious plantsmen who defied embargoes and English-French hostilities. And praise the women - nay, *ladies* - that were instrumental in bringing dahlia glory to England. Or maybe not.

A BEAUT OF A TALE

First credit for introducing dahlias to the British generally goes to the 1st Marchioness of Bute. Various described as the wife or the daughter-in-law of Lord Bute, this noble gardener was supposed to have supplied Kew gardeners with seeds from Madrid, where Lord Bute served as English ambassador. An erroneous reference in the second edition of *Hortus Kewensis* (the seminal botanical work of plant listings at Kew) pegged the arrival of the seeds at 1789. This date was accepted for some time as the beginning of dahlia culture in England - so much so that its National Dahlia Society celebrated the Dahlia Centenary in 1889!

However, the mistake was discovered by historian C. Harman Payne, whose article in the September 1916 issue of *The Gardener's Chronicle* painstakingly pointed to the inconsistencies and alluded to the possibility of a printer's error in transposing 1798 with 1789. Since it is well documented that the latter year was the first instance of dahlias flowering in Madrid's *Real Jardin*, it is nigh impossible that Lady Bute had a hand in disseminating its seeds. Moreover, while John Stuart, 3rd Earl of Bute gained notoriety as a short-term British prime minister and friend of King George III, he gained fame as a lover of botany and director of Kew Gardens. In fact, he gave his life to the pursuit: in 1792, he fell off a cliff in Hampshire trying to reach for a flower and died soon after of his injuries.

Married to his offspring, it was Bute's daughter-in-law who may have sent seeds directly to Kew. When the marquess (*marquis*) of Bute was posted to Madrid as British ambassador, he apparently made the acquaintance of Casimiro Ortega, Cavanilles' garden director. Whether that resulted in the introduction of dahlia seeds to Kew in 1798 rests on evidence that is not quite compelling: an entry in the aforementioned *Hortus* and remarks on several horticultural specimens found by Payne. Significantly, plant lists such as Jonas Dryander's *Delineations of Exotick Plants at Kew (1796-1803)* do not mention dahlias. What became of them? According to uncorroborated sources, the plants raised from the seeds succumbed the following year: "they were lost by taking too much care of them." Thinking they must be warm-climate flowers, the Kew gardeners took the newly-arrived Mexicans into the tropical plant area where they perished.

Little also is known about Lady Bute. Charlotte Jane Hickman-Windsor (1746-1800) leaves a tantalizing mystery in the wake of so many attributions. The nobility was not keen for hands-on garden work in those days, leaving such efforts to the lower classes. Any assumed relationship between her and Kew is murky, at best. If after the accidental death of Lord Bute, his family continued supporting the growing plant collection, one would assume that long-time garden director William T. Aiton would make reference to that relationship and credit Lady Bute. Nothing doing. In Texas parlance, this would be a case of "all hat and no cattle."

LADY HOLLAND

Better arguments exist for another woman of high breeding who brought prominence to the dahlia. Lady Elizabeth Holland was a rare bird - a beautiful woman far ahead of her time, well-traveled, strong-willed, opinionated and shockingly scandalous! The daughter of a Jamaican land owner, Elizabeth grew up in England and (at the age of fifteen) was married to Sir Godfrey Webster of Battle Abbey, Sussex in 1786. Elizabeth Vassall so became the child-bride of a much older man whose brutish habits mirrored those of the country squire in *Tom Jones*. "At fifteen, through caprice and folly, I was thrown into the power of one who was a pompous coxcomb, with youth, beauty, and a good disposition, all to be squandered," she recalled. Nevertheless, Elizabeth was a dutiful, if unhappy, wife and mother to their three children.

She soon escaped the stifling environment of her jealous, raging husband by going abroad for extended periods. On one of these journeys, in 1794, she encountered the young Lord Holland (Henry Richard Fox). As was common among scions of the upper classes back then, the 3rd Baron Holland was traveling with an entourage of three other young nobles to Florence. The relationship among these expatriates blossomed slowly over the next several months - all well-documented by Elizabeth who wrote copious diaries.

In 1796, the lovers returned to England - and stepped into a society firestorm! A visibly pregnant Elizabeth confronted her husband and asked for a divorce. Sir Webster at first refused; it took an act of Parliament to grant the divorce on July 4, 1797. She had to forsake custody of her older children and give up any claim to Webster's estate. Two days later, wedding bells rang for Elizabeth and Lord Holland.

Now the mistress of Holland House in Kensington - these days the mansion is used as a youth hostel - Elizabeth quickly became famous for inviting notables in the arts and sciences to her salon. Gifted with a rapier wit and holding strong opinions, she could also be abrasive and overbearing. Reportedly, her husband was often on the receiving end of her domineering attitude. England could not contain her long. In 1802, she and Lord Holland departed for France and then Spain, where they would support the Spanish opposition to Napoleon's armies for the next several years.

Her prolific diaries reveal little how she came to be associated with dahlias at all. In scouring *The Spanish Journal of Elizabeth Lady Holland* (available on microfiche at the University of Washington Library), there are lengthy descriptions of evening dinners, of the pageantry of bullfighting, and of country impressions. Only rarely are gardens mentioned, and certainly nothing that would lead one to conclude that Elizabeth had any more than fleeting interests in botany. In spite of spending years traveling up and down the Iberian Peninsula, no encounters with Cavanilles are noted (although their friend, the Duke of Infantado, ironically had Cavanilles as his preceptor in Paris).

No remark also is made of packages sent back to England. There was a lively exchange of mail, judging from Elizabeth's notes of arriving packages. The librarian at Holland House, a Mr. Buonaiuti, reported that "on the 20th of May 1804, the Right Honorable Lady Holland sent home from Spain a parcel of seeds." These included the three species described by Cavanilles and all flowered later that summer. He also recorded the blossoming of a saffron-colored dahlia, now named *D. crocata*. There is some possibility that the plant material may have originated from Thouin, rather than Cavanilles. An excerpt in *MacDonald's Gardening Dictionary* makes direct reference to the growing plant collection. Buonaiuti corresponded with his lord in considerable detail about each cultivar, noting his experience in raising dahlias in London. On July 10, 1806, he reports that "above a hundred plants of Dahlias are now growing in various parts of the gardens at Holland-House in the highest luxuriance." Buonaiuti also keeps receiving new dahlias. In light of the deteriorating political climate and the outbreak of war between England and France in the interim, it is amazing that any mail reached the British Isles.

Lady Holland was most certainly not involved in dahlia culture. While she enjoyed a well-tended garden at Holland House, she preferred to consort with the likes of Wordsworth, Washington Irving, Talleyrand, and the Lake Poets. Her diaries sparkle with sharp analyses of political events and court gossip; disliked by women, she was lionized by the intelligentsia well into her dotage. She bore two more children and died in 1845.



Lady Holland (painting by Louis Gauffier)

An abiding life-long love affair with Lord Holland marked Elizabeth's reign as mistress of Holland House. From its gardens dahlia seeds soon were distributed to other estates and nurseries. The introduction of new plant material from German sources led to a virtual explosion of dahlia varieties. Some twenty years later, Lord Holland put pen to paper and expressed his admiration thusly:

*The dahlia you brought to our isle
Your praises forever shall speak
'Mid gardens as sweet as your smile
And colour as bright as your cheek*

CREDIT OBSCURE PLANTSMEN

Perhaps even more prominently featured should be the contributions of several nurserymen during this fecund period of dahlia culture. In 1802 John Fraser introduced *D. coccinea* obtained in France (Thouin?) to his nursery at Sloane Square, Chelsea. It flowered at the Apothecaries Gardens the following year and was depicted in the 1804 *Botanical Magazine* (Plate No. 762). Similar detailed illustrations also appeared in the *Botanists Repository*, Vol 6, pl 408 (of *D. pinnata*) and a year later of a semi-double variant, *D. pinnata nana* - evidence of early hybridization. The leading garden publication of the day, *Curtis' Botanical Magazine*, promoted the dahlia with fine color drawings. The dahlia was becoming the fancy of the English gardener, entranced by its exotic appearance and the quickly expanding palette of colors.

Mired in obscurity are the contributions of another importer, a Colonel E.J.A. Woodford, who also defied the Channel blockade by gathering a *D. rosea* (from Thouin again?) and raising it to bloom in autumn 1803 at his Vauxhall garden. An article by Richard A. Salisbury in 1808 erroneously gives credit to Woodford for having raised the first dahlia on England's soil. No matter - by then the popularity of dahlia culture had surpassed all expectations.

PAINTERS, POETS, AND POLITICS

Myths which are believed in tend to become true

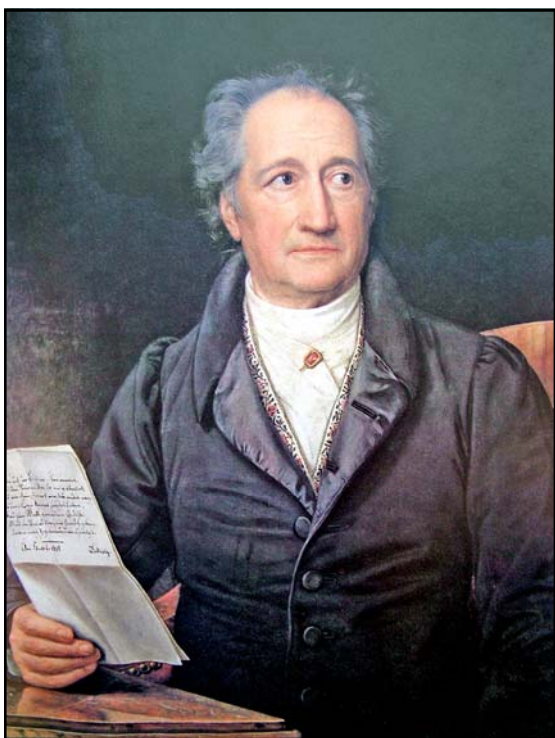
George Orwell

Anyone looking for visible evidence of the dahlia's triumphant march through Europe will find that its influence on the arts (apart from garden art) has been limited, to say the least. There are precious few references to dahlia portraiture, even as a component of a larger display of flowers. Even greater is the paucity of depictions in the plastic arts. Dahlia sculpture? Perish the thought. In the field of poetry there is a smattering of dahlia-related works, none of world renown. Have you asked yourself why? When the rose and the lily have been the subject of poetry, powerful symbols of national identity, and appear in tapestry, heraldry, sculpture, theater and musical works, just to name the most obvious, why have the muses forsaken the extraordinary dahlia?

The easy answer is that the Western world has been acquainted with dahlias for only 200 years, whereas cultivation of other flowers goes back for millennia. Flowers that are widely grown and have achieved symbolic value are apt to be adopted by cultures more readily than exotic blooms with short histories. Add to this the emergence of a mass media society that seeks short-lived imagery, the decline of outlets for poetry, an emphasis on topical literature, and a shift from reflective to activist art, and you can see that the dahlia will strike the peoples' fancy when we return to the days of powdered wigs and silk knickers. Allow me to illustrate:

JOHANN WOLFGANG VON GOETHE

The greatest man of German literature - indeed one of the major figures of world literature - did not set out to be a gardener. No more so than he aimed to become a natural scientist. Young Goethe (1749-1832), the offspring of a prominent Frankfurt noble house, actually planned on a law career. He also had an active interest in art, traveled widely, and developed many enduring relationships - including one with Alexander v.



Poet and gardener—Goethe in his study

Humboldt - and even more (less permanent) ones with the fair sex. His first work, *The Sorrows of the Young Werther*, was a loosely autobiographical work that made him famous practically overnight and gave birth to the *Sturm und Drang* movement. A prolific writer, poet, playwright and keen observer of the political realm, Goethe was asked to come to Weimar's court by the Saxon Duke Carl August in 1776.

His benefactor offered the young lawyer a position as privy councillor; the duke also arranged with him the purchase of a garden estate in nearby Frauenplan. In time, Goethe developed good relationships with court gardeners in Dresden and Jena. His closest bond, however, was with the Sckell family responsible for Carl August's Belvedere gardens in Weimar. There was a steady exchange of information and plants, as Goethe sought to create his personal idyll. In the course of his botanical pursuits, the poet also espoused a theory of metamorphosis contradicting Linné's rigid taxonomy. He aimed to find the characteristics of the 'primal plant' and also developed a color theory that later would influence the Impressionists. While he took a lively interest in the new exotics sent by his botanist friends, in the garden he reserved his undying passion for roses.

Von Goethe may have first seen dahlias raised by the Sckells. Plant inventories in Jena listed *Georgina rosea* and *G. purpurea* as early as 1809. Subsequent listings indicate that a number of species (which may

well already have been hybrids) were raised in these court gardens. By 1820, dahlias also were offered for public sale. His high political profile allowed Goethe to spend considerable time with garden staff. One of these visits led to a dahlia planting in Jena's botanical garden, from which he chose a number of beautiful varieties. Later he became acquainted with the nursery of August F. Dreyssig in Tonndorf near Weimar. The gentleman gardener highly valued Dreyssig's expertise and found validation of his metamorphosis theory in the gardener's dahlia hybridization efforts. That nursery catalog was growing quickly, with many appealing semi-double and decorative dahlias listed in its price list. Goethe was taking a great interest in raising dahlias on his own.

This relationship came to a tragic end as Dreyssig drowned some years later in the nursery fish pond. His widow repeatedly sought to rekindle the interest of Goethe in her dahlias, but only once did the elderly Goethe return, surprising the staff. His detailed diary notes: "Madame Dreyssig was not present. Visited her garden, guided by her assistant and a young, knowledgeable gardener. Georginas and asters still exceptional, but have suffered from last night's frost." The visitor selected some of the newest double and largest dahlias, particularly in Goethe's favorite colors of purple and lavender. The roots were delivered to his home in the following spring. To the end of his days, Goethe enjoyed the dahlias - but he never again visited the nursery.



Goethe's garden house, surrounded by his estate, today is a tourist attraction

BOŽENA NĚMCOVÁ

An unlikely candidate for Queen of the Dahlias, Božena Němcová (1820-62), though born in the imperial capital of Vienna as Barbara Pankel, grew up in her mother's homeland and embraced its folk culture. Attending school in Česká Skalice (North Central Bohemia) afforded the girl the immersion into Czech folklore and customs that would mark her later work. Married at 17 to a much older Josef Němec, a customs official, she was drawn into a circle of ardent patriots whose actions would fuel the movement called the Czech National Revival. She was also comely and a welcome sight to town folk. Two days after her wedding, Božena was crowned Dahlia Queen and hostess of the Dahlia Ball of the newly formed Czech Dahlia Society. This 'Slavnost Jiřinek' became an annual social event in a hall especially constructed for exhibition and entertainment. Its site, Steidler's roadside inn, The White Lion (heraldic symbol of the Czechs) also served as headquarters of the Dahlia Circle. Only some of its deliberations dealt with dahlia culture; ethnic identity and the language arts were other topics. The disguise was warranted. In the repressive Metternich Era, the Austrian authorities were deeply suspicious of any such nationalist fervor in their crown lands.



Božena Němcová, Czech national poetess

The Dahlia Circle - composed of teachers, priests, intellectuals, and other notables under the leadership of parson Hurdálek – mixed business with pleasure. What more innocuous disguise for nationalist activity than meeting as a flower club? Dahlias were obtained from German growers in Dresden and Bad Köstritz, and several of the clergy became quite accomplished in hybridizing and in raising large plantings. The Dahlia Ball of 1839 was held in honor of a local scholar, František Smetana. His cousin Bedřich Smetana, now known the world over, attended the fête and was so inspired to write the Dahlia Polka (listen to this piece on the Božena Němcová Museum website www.bozenanemcova.cz/music/jirinka.mid).

Meanwhile, Božena Němcová was achieving renown as an author: her *Babička* ("Grandma"), a sentimental recounting of her youth, stirred the patriotism of Czechs as few literary works had done before. Now living in Prague, Němcová also contributed poems, short stories, fairy tales, and penned letters that were published in the Czech-language press. She continued to interact with the Dahlia Circle and occasionally visited her adopted home town - not because of the dahlias, though. In fact, she was not much of a gardener at all.

The Dahlia Circle and the dahlia exhibitions ceased to exist when, in the aftermath of the 1848 revolts, nationalist organizations were suppressed and even purely social events such as the Dahlia Ball lost their enthusiastic following. A stubborn patriot, Josef Němec lost favor with his superiors and eventually was posted to the Slovak border. His wife, living in Prague, had grown estranged from her husband, and her final years were spent in the company of other men - and far from any dahlia garden. The town of Česká Skalice, nevertheless, honors her memory with a well-appointed museum which features several items from the Dahlia Circle's heyday, including the chalice offered as first prize at the dahlia show.

CLAUDE MONET

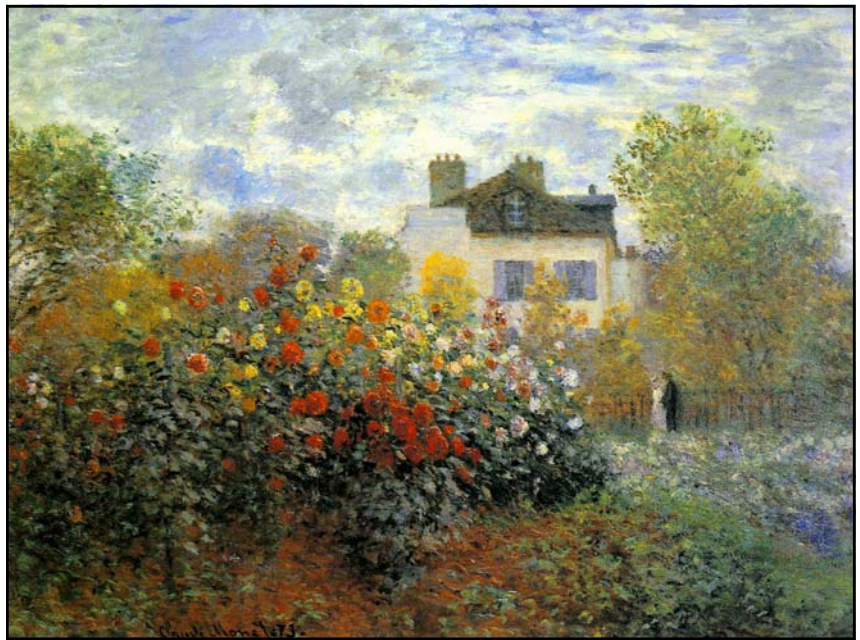
Doubtless the best-known among flower painters and a major figure of the Impressionist School, Claude Monet (1840-1926) painted exquisite caricatures in his youth. The son of a Paris grocer, the talented artist had his first exhibition in an art supply store. Explaining that "I am good for nothing except painting and gardening," Monet recollected that "gardening was something I learned in my youth when I was unhappy. Perhaps I owe having become a painter to flowers." True, his first love among them was the dahlia, preferring small, simple flowers to double varieties. Soon, though, his interests ranged farther afield. Young Monet was an iconoclast, tempestuous, a fanatic about painting, and he also developed strong opinions about gardening - as evidenced and as well-developed as in his garden at Giverny.

After military service in Algeria, Claude Monet attended the Académie Suisse, where he met Paul Cezanne and Camille Pissaro. Later he linked up with other Impressionists, such as Renoir and Sisley. The very term Impressionism is derived from his work. At first painting landscapes and city scenes, he gravitated to garden and flower themes in the 1870s, when he moved with his new wife Camille to a house in Argenteuil. *The Garden at Argenteuil (The Dahlias)* prominently depicts vibrant dahlias. His friend and fellow Impressionist Pierre-Auguste Renoir also then painted Monet in that garden. Another famous portrait, *Young Women Among Flowers* (1875) practically drowns their faces in the blooms. Dahlias also appear in the foreground of *Gladioli* (1876). His family had grown to include two boys, one of whom is depicted next to red dahlias in *Camille Monet and Child in the Garden*. Tragedy struck in 1879, when Camille took ill and died. For a time the widower lived with his mistress Alice in nearby Vetheuil. *The Steps at Vetheuil* (1881) offers red dahlias as a foreground to electric sunflowers. His companion is depicted in *Alice Hoschedé in the Garden* reading next to what appears to be dahlias (as you may imagine, with Impressionists plant identification tends to be a challenge).



Renoir paints Monet painting dahlias

Monet began a restless search for a more idyllic residence along the Seine. He found it when he rented a house in Giverny that would become his home and his life's work. Having just married Alice, Claude Monet began a blissful and very prolific period. "Il me faut surtout avoir des fleurs, toujours, toujours!" he exclaimed. "More than anything, I must have flowers, always, always." His garden was awash in colorful flowers, and the paintings increasingly reflected the master's immediate surroundings. A commission for 36 door panels displaying different flowers yielded three dahlia paintings (1883). While other Impressionists (Matisse, Cezanne, Renoir, and Marcel Dyf) also created highly regarded still lives of dahlia bouquets, their passion for garden themes was nowhere as pronounced as that of Monet. For the next forty years, the prolific Claude Monet allowed gardening and nature painting to dominate his life.



Monet's home at Argenteuil with dahlias in the foreground

An interesting aspect of his relationship with dahlias is that he engaged in hybridization. His preferred variety ETOILE DE DIGOIN was an early stellar (now orchid) variety and its seedlings were introduced to the French public in 1916 amid great wonder. These bright stars set off against the dark green foliage were simply irresistible. The Giverny garden's *Grande Allée* was planted mostly with cactus dahlias, some of which appeared in Monet's work.

However, it must be admitted that Monet offered entire *series* of portraits of water lilies, particularly after he had a stream diverted to create a water garden with Japanese influences guiding the design. Iris paintings also were his favorites. Other flowers, such as roses, poppies, lilacs, and chrysanthemums got their just due; so to claim that, by the end of his long life, Monet was still favoring dahlias is stretching the truth. But in the service of the dahlia a mouthful of hyperbole always is more palatable to its fanatics. Just remember who is serving and when to say "When!"

DAHLIA JUAREZII

History will bear me out, particularly as I shall write that history myself
Winston Churchill

There are a hundred dahlia species names that have been adopted and later discarded since that seminal dahlia year 1789. Botanists have a way of discovering the nuances that separate one plant from another and then noting a principal attribute in its Latin scientific appellation. Others choose to honor another scientist, a benefactor, or some notable. Witness the dahlia (of course, named for Anders Dahl)!

One of the most enduring myths surrounds the reportedly accidental discovery of *Dahlia juarezii*. According to popular belief, this dahlia was introduced in 1872 when a Dutch raiser named J. T. van den Berg, Jr., of Jutphaas found among a shipment of rotting tubers one viable root. Much to his surprise, the dahlia emerging from the surviving plant was quite different from what people then considered normal dahlia forms. As reported in the *Sempervirens-Geillustreerd Weekblad voor den Tuinbouw in Nederland* ("Sempervirens - Illustrated Weekly for Gardening in Holland") of October 25, 1879, van den Berg recollects:

"In the autumn of 1872 a friend of mine in Mexico sent me a small case containing various kinds of seeds and roots. They arrived in poor condition, the seeds mixed and the roots rotten. However, I kept all that were any good and carefully awaited the result. At last a tender shoot developed itself, which proved to be a dahlia. Cuttings of this were taken, and the few young plants thus obtained were planted out in June. They flowered later, and surprised me and others who saw them by their large, rich crimson flowers, quite different from all other dahlias."

A new species? An exotic hybrid? Well, whether by fortune or design, Mr. van den Berg had a sensation on his hands. His 1874 catalog touts the newcomer in stronger language: "New imported variety from Mexico, very large flowers, splendid, fiery orange scarlet, equal to the beautiful color of the red poppy. Its form is very outstanding and differs in every respect of all known dahlia flowers. At a distance one should believe to see the flowers of the *Cereus speciosissimus* (Cactus) but then with fine, pipe-like, rolled up flower petals." He named it *D. juarezii* after the recently deceased Mexican president, Benito Juárez.

Mexico's Lincoln, as this Zapotec Indian leader became known, was widely admired for his honesty, moral courage and devotion to democratic principles. A long-term politician with ties to native forces, he helped topple General Santa Anna. When the French invaded Mexico in 1861, President Juárez established a government in exile. Mexican forces ultimately overcame the occupiers and restored Juárez to power in 1867. However, there is no record that this statesman had leisure time to send dahlias abroad.



1879 pencil drawing of *D. juarezii* in *Gardeners' Chronicle*

It remains a deep mystery who van den Berg's Mexican correspondent was. All available documentation stops with the above publication, and we are unable to ascertain whether the raiser carried forward extensive hybridization of this new form. The *Gardeners' Chronicle* of October 4, 1879, provides some additional insight and deserves to be quoted *in toto*:

"At one of the recent meetings of the Royal Horticultural Society considerable attention was attracted to a remarkable Dahlia, exhibited by Mr. Cannell under the name of Cactus Dahlia. In the Dahlia as ordinarily seen the florets are

rolled up so as to resemble so many short quills open at the ends, but in the present case the florets were all flat or nearly so, strap-shaped like the outer florets of the original species (ray-florets) and of a rich, crimson colour. The appearance was, therefore, very striking, and suggestive of a new race in Dahlias analogous in some respects to the Japanese chrysanthemums. On inquiry we found that the Dahlia was obtained from Mr. Cullingford, of Phillimore Gardens, who received it from Messrs. Ant. Roozen & Son, of Overveen, near Haarlem, under the name of *D. juarezii*. On application the latter, gentlemen, we learn that they derived it some few years since from a French nurseryman and suppose it to have been imported from Mexico."

As van den Berg explains, the French origin was no accident: "The fact of its having been derived from France is easily understood when I say that I sent one of the leading French seedsmen a great many Dahlia roots and amongst them were some of *Juarezii*."

There may be another French connection to the forerunner of the cactus dahlia. Already in 1808, Joseph Sabine described dahlias "with the rays tubular, the florets being united at the edges, a state, perhaps, more singular than elegant, but it is not constant, for the plant which produces tubular rays in one season will have them fully expanded in the next." French hybridizers featured prominently in developing new forms (collarlet, orchid, and anemone), probably due to their unwillingness to submit to rigid show criteria that produced generations of pompon and decorative forms during the 1800s. The best-known early cactus dahlia, the fiery red *Etoile de Diable*, may have been saddled with an unfortunate name, but it also became seed parent to a host of improved cultivars. French growers debunked the perception that cactus dahlias were sterile by introducing more refined forms and a broader palette of colors.

English raisers also figured in the development of cactus dahlias. Apart from Mr. Cullingford (Vice President of the NDS), Charles G. Wyatt cites a long list of cactus raisers in his *Origins and Development of the Cactus Dahlia* (Journal of the RHS, 1901). Among the first valuable introductions is the well-known Beauty of Brentwood, offered by J. T. West, who found just one viable seed and then focused on cactus raisings.

The trail may be murky, but it's quite clear that *D. juarezii*, whether by accident or tall tale was no species dahlia. Even if we grant its Mexican origin, there is good evidence that its genetic material already was mixed. Geneticist W. E. Safford claimed that another species (*D. popenovii*) "is probably an ancestor of the cactus-flowered dahlia, a group derived from *D. juarezii*. The latter species is a hybrid, supposed to have originated naturally in Central America through the crossing of *D. popenovii* and some other species." Like *D. pinnata* whose semi-double appearance indicated mixed parentage, one of the ancestors of *D. juarezii* must have been a single-flowered species with eight revolute ray florets.

So had the dahlia world not embraced rigorous orthodoxy in the 1800s, we may well have seen early development of finely quilled cactus, such as the purple sensation Shinkyoku, and found that diversity of cactus forms that we now cherish. The graceful forms, the plethora of color, and the range of size that mark modern cactus dahlias all are credit to the raiser who chooses not to toss a promising seedling into the cauldron of convention.



Dahlia Serpentina, a German cactus dahlia from 1908

DAHLIA MYTHS: Reprise

As we know, there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns -- the ones we don't know we don't know.

Donald Rumsfeld (2002)

The dahlia - a merger of myth and mystery? Or a garden flower whose proven attributes needed embellishment to sell to a fickle public that had become enchanted with the exotic? Was Grandma's dahlia garden just too ordinary, too time-consuming, not to mention old-fashioned? What is it about information that is on the face obvious and reassuringly believable, and then when someone stirs around for corroboration finds a host of incomplete and wildly inaccurate or unrelated facts? Hey, don't put all the blame on our former Secretary of Defense: taking flights of fancy and jumping to conclusions are not just limited to politics.

So now we have reached the end of our journey, a trip that has taken us through major topics in dahlia history. It also was a geographic journey: for those who have followed along, the exploration took you in neat chronological order to Mexico, then to Spain, a side trip to Sweden, to France, then to Germany, and finally to England. This approach also consciously mirrors the transit of the dahlia from its homelands to Europe.

In an effort to summarize the findings - and perhaps in a valiant attempt to head off the perpetuation of dahlia myths - I will give web designers, pamphleteers, dahlia functionaries, and garden scribes in a nutshell the essence of the dahlia experience. Some will get the story straight, but others will continue to combine fact and fiction. When you are reaching for a kicker headline, prosaic prose just doesn't sell. Montezuma's Favorite Flower? Now that's a line worth repeating!

Back in the Mexican highlands, you will find wild dahlias. Their range extends from the semi-arid sierras in Durango state all the way beyond Mexico and neighboring Guatemala into tropical Central America. For the brief period of Aztec ascendancy, the dahlia shared the vast Valley of Mexico with the rich flora found around the capital Tenochtitlán. The flower, however, was not embraced by the Aztec Empire: It was demonstrably neither a food source, nor used in medicinal applications, as ornamentation, for irrigation systems, clothing fiber, or any ceremonial purpose. While it was reportedly growing in the imperial gardens of Moctezuma, the Huaxtepec garden has never been catalogued, so the brief reference could have applied to a similar plant like cosmos, zinnia or even the brilliant orange red tithonia.

The term *acocotl*, often ascribed to dahlias, is a Nahuatl name for a 'water pipe' plant; it was used for several flowering plants. Similarly, the various alternative names and unrelated ones ('*couanenepilli*') given to plants with similar foliage or flower characteristics are inconclusive. Natives were trained to draw plants by their new Spanish overlords, resulting often in primitive renditions that later permit only conjecture, not absolute proof. Not until Spanish explorers under Francisco Hernández began cataloging the bounty of New Spain, did botanical illustration and physical description converge. However, Hernández' work was not published for nearly a hundred years, and with Italian scholars' assistance their interpretations and sketches may have muddied the evidence in that compendium. To hamper verification further, the secretly housed original illustrations were then lost in the great Escorial fire of 1671.

We then meet up with the father figures of the dahlia: Vicente Cervantes, teacher at the royal gardens in Mexico City, sent plant material (tubers? seeds?) to the Royal Botanical Garden in Madrid sometime before 1789. These had been provided by botanical explorers Sessé (his director) and Juan Mociño (a native assistant). In Spain, Antonio José Cavanilles, a botanist with a nominally clerical background, had escaped the French Revolution to find refuge in this garden. His director, Casimiro Ortega, was not too keen on his new charge and sought to send him far afield. Nevertheless, Cavanilles persisted in his classification efforts, and in 1791 described *Dahlia pinnata*, a semi-double flower (and thus, most likely already a hybrid).

Cavanilles named the plant dahlia to honor the memory of a recently-deceased Swedish botanist, Anders Dahl. He did so to recognize a colleague of his friend, the famous botanist Carl Peter Thunberg. There is no evidence that Cavanilles and Dahl ever met - in fact, Anders Dahl was the classic case of an impoverished scholar whose fame (and travels) did not extend beyond Scandinavia.

The scene then shifts to France, where devoted botanists such as André Thouin and Augustin-Pyramus de Candolle sought to hybridize the new arrival in their gardens. Perhaps the most under-appreciated influence on dahlia culture - the introduction of new dahlia strains through the efforts of Alexander v. Humboldt - came about as a result of the German ex-

plorer's stay in Paris after his American journeys. His assistant Aimé Bonpland had developed a close working relationship with Empress Joséphine, whose retreat at Malmaison also became one of Europe's richest plant laboratories. Although Napoleon's spouse favored roses above all, her garden director Count Lelieur also began hybridizing dahlias. Not always in accord with Bonpland, it seems, for the Count was soon sent packing to his estate in St. Cloud where he continued developing new dahlia strains for the remainder of his life. The count also experimented with the use of dahlia tubers for human consumption but was forced to concede that neither hungry French gourmands nor their livestock were a match for the plump, but bitter, root.

Meanwhile, Empress Joséphine - having been unceremoniously dumped by Napoleon in 1809 so he could consummate a political marriage - remained at Malmaison. Upon her death, Bonpland returned to the Americas in 1816, but eventually died poor and ignobly in Argentina. On the other hand, his erstwhile companion, Alexander v. Humboldt (soon recognized as a giant in German science) had sent plants and seeds to botanical gardens and courts elsewhere in Europe. This influx of new genetic material benefited the dahlia tremendously. The nobleman's mentor, botanist professor Carl Ludwig Willdenow, had been working on a revision of Linnaeus' seminal work *Species Plantarum*, and he surmised that the dahlia had been misclassified since another plant had already been named by Thunberg for his deceased friend Dahl.

Willdenow so honored an acquaintance, the German Johann Gottlieb Georgi, who had explored and catalogued Russia's natural environment and its peoples' culture in the employment of the czar until Georgi's untimely death in 1802. Most certainly, Georgi was unaware of dahlias, and having been neither a botanist nor gardener, could not have made any contributions to the flower's growing popularity. Nevertheless, the name stuck, even when the reclassification was proven to be in error. Today, dahlias are still called georginas in parts of Scandinavia, the Baltic and in Slavic-speaking lands.

Instead it was the gardens of Germany and England that provided that necessary boost. Sponsorship by none other than Johann Wolfgang v. Goethe, an avid gardener and scientist, and by garden directors such as Otto, Breiter and Deegen offered the dahlia hybrids to the world. Teachers, priests, and the occasional national poet were drawn to dahlia culture, although it must be admitted that the inclusion of Božena Němcová here is strictly for the sake of a good story. The Czech poetess mostly raised eyebrows, and her Dahlia Circle was less a sedate gardening club and more a home-grown nationalist conspiracy. The dahlia was just a convenient foil to ward off Metternichean suspicion.

Lady Holland figures large in dahlia history, but largely as a sponsor of horticulture at her estate, Holland House. Also not a gardener, the attractive globetrotter instead opted for romance with the scion of one of England's noble families. Only problem was, she was still married. Once that little indiscretion was resolved through divorce and quick remarriage, Lady Elizabeth Holland developed a passion for genteel socializing. It was her gardeners that handled the floriculture. Another lady of high standing, the Marchioness of Bute, also had only a weak case for being listed in dahlia lore. Poor documentation and contradictory evidence of her efforts in sending plant material back to England from her Spanish domicile dooms her to the periphery of dahlia history.

Finally, a review of the dahlia's rise to prominence would not be complete without a work-up of historical evidence concerning the arrival of *D. juarezii*. As tempting as it seemed, whatever description Dutch raiser J. T. van den Berg, Jr., provided to introduce this new form, the cactus dahlia certainly was not a new species. It was a sensation, though, and by honoring President Juárez of Mexico brought into view our indebtedness to our southern neighbors. Who knows, had early raisers not been so vigorous in following a rigid classification system that favored decorative and show dahlias, the world would have been enriched by an even greater diversity of form and color than that initiated with *D. juarezii*. After all, the dahlia still has tremendous genetic potential, as is proven every year in show and trial. With so many in garden circles favoring exotics and variegation, when will we see a variegated foliage dahlia in exhibition? And why not?

One of the thrilling aspects of research is the pursuit of leads and verification of assumptions. Yes, there are known unknowns - we met plenty in this journey. The Internet and easier global communication have made empirical research at least more efficient, and allows us to contact collectors and specialists who then direct the search into channels that allow valuable data mining. So no longer is intellectual laziness excusable. The inexhaustible supply of information now available (through print, visual media, and the Internet) should arouse intellectual curiosity among those of us who seek verifiable, empirical truth.



Dahlien-Zentrum interior with permanent displays



A visiting Dr. Keith Hammett discusses Deegen's contributions with Zentrum staffers Claudia Friedrich and Wolfgang Ritschel

THE DAHLIEN-ZENTRUM

Not many repositories of dahlia knowledge accessible to most dahlia lovers exist outside of botanical libraries, musty university herbaria, and museums. One notable exception is the Dahlien-Zentrum, a central collection point for all things dahlia. Located in Saxony's resort town of Bad Köstritz, the area has been a hotbed of dahlia culture since the days of Christian Deegen. Several long-term dahlia nurseries in the vicinity help cement the reputation of Bad Köstritz as Dahlia Town.

Over the years the center, supported by the municipality and working in close partnership with the German DDFGG (Deutsche Dahlien-, Fuchsien- und Gladiolen-Gesellschaft), has sponsored workshops, hosted notable guests, and maintains a demonstration garden outside of its modern headquarters. There is even a plot for species and historic dahlia varieties. The staff collects literature and other material from across the globe; they catalog and scan donated publications to archive, and regularly exhibit interesting artifacts. Having such a repository of information, and one so easily accessible by the public, is invaluable. Consider donating literature and valuable exhibition material, but also support this effort financially to ensure the continued growth of this unique research institution.

The website of the center provides additional information (visit www.dahlienzentrum.de).

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

For the past four decades, Martin Král has grown, photographed, and written about dahlias from the perspective of an avid hobby gardener. An early member of the Puget Sound Dahlia Association and currently the organizer of the American Dahlia Society annual photo contest, he regularly corresponds with dahlia enthusiasts and experts on an international level. Since 1980 he also has served as contributing editor to *Dahlias of Today*, a leading publication of the PSDA. More than a hundred articles have appeared under his byline. His interest in the early development of dahlias and dahlia history was piqued by some glaring inconsistencies and unsupported assumptions found in popular literature about dahlias. A native of Austria, he is conversant in several languages and - although his academic background is actually in political science - Martin believes that is an advantage for taking a broad international approach in research about favorite plants and gardening.

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NOTES



19th century French double decorative originations