

DAHLIAS - Botanical basics

Dahlia is a genus of summer- and autumn-flowering tuberous perennials, and a member of the *Asteraceae* family. Dahlias are grown as bedding plants or for their showy, colourful and robust flower heads, which are good for cut flower use and exhibition. Dahlia flowers come in almost every colour except a true blue, and range in size from tiny single blooms to 8" or wider "dinner plates" (1). Dahlia tubers are half-hardy to frost tender, and need a sunny position with well-draining soil, and generous amounts of water. They are uncomplicated to grow, but may be subject to attack by aphids, red spider mite, and thrips, and can succumb quickly to virus infection. (2)

History

Dahlias have been grown in Central America since before the Spanish conquest of that region in the early 1500s. The Aztecs called dahlias "hollow pipes" or "water tubes" because of the plants' hollow stems. The plants were cherished by the Aztecs for their ornamental, medicinal, and nutritional value. The Spanish sent dahlia roots and tubers back to Spain, but they provoked little interest there.

In 1789, the first dahlia seeds were sent to the Director of the Madrid Botanical Gardens by his counterpart at the Mexican Botanical Gardens. The Spaniard named this new flower in honour of a Swedish colleague, botanist Anders Dahl - hence its name, "dahlia". (3) Coincidentally, shortly after it had been named "dahlia" in Spain, a German professor attempted to rename it "georgina" in honour of a professor Georgi in Russia. (4) The name "georgina" persisted in Russia and parts of Eastern Europe for 250 years, and is still recognized there today.

Over many years, European horticulturalists continued to propagate dahlia seeds with increasing success, which also developed public interest in the plants. Through the 19th century dahlias and their tubers became sought

after, but were grown only by those who owned sufficient property or who were wealthy enough to afford the tubers, some of which cost many thousands of dollars each.

In the early 19th century, growers in the United Kingdom raised a range of dahlias, but were all what are now called “ball” dahlias, with a few anemone varieties. (5) Also by the early 1800s, the first large, double flowers were bred in Belgium. (6) During the late 19th century, growers in France produced the “collerette” type of dahlia. Shortly afterwards, growers in Germany produced the “Lilliput” dahlia, whose name was changed in France to “pomponne”, as the small flower resembled the button on French sailors’ hats. “Pomponne” was subsequently corrupted to today’s “pompon” dahlia. In the late 19th century, a German nurseryman received a new variety from Mexico, the cactus dahlia. All modern cactus dahlias are descendants of those early tubers. Dwarf versions of dahlias, discovered in Mexico in 1750, were first called “Tom Thumbs”, then renamed as today’s “mignons”. (7) As the dahlia is native to Mexico and represents a significant part of that country’s cultural and natural heritage, it was officially declared the national flower of Mexico in 1963 (*Dahlia pinnata* / *Dahlia rosea*). (8)

Today, dahlias are popular around the world. Many dahlia societies have been founded in the flower’s honour, the first of which was the National Dahlia Society in London in 1881. (9) Dahlias grow well in both the northern and southern hemispheres, and have become big business in many countries.

References

1. Canada Post Day of Issue Cover Sheet. Ottawa, 2020.
2. *The Gardener’s Encyclopedia of Plants and Flowers*. Brickell, Christopher, ed. Dorling Kindersley, London, England. 1989. p. 451.
3. *The New Plant Library: Dahlias*. Collins, Ted. London, England. 2000. p. 12.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

5. Ibid., p. 14.

6. Canada Post Day of Issue Cover Sheet. Ottawa, 2020.

7. Op. cit.

8. Wikipedia, accessed 30 March 2026.

9. Op. cit., p. 15.