

# Tale from the Garden

Dahlias are a must for the summer border and make excellent, dramatic cut flowers. They come in a huge array of colours and shapes as you can see from Harry's spectacular display in Church this Sunday, picked from his allotment & the Manse garden!

Dahlia is a genus of tuberous plants that are members of the Asteraceae family; related species include the sunflower, daisy, chrysanthemum, and zinnia. They grow from small tubers planted in the spring. Picking a favourite dahlia is like going through a button box! As well as coming in a rainbow of colours, dahlia flowers can range in size from petite 2-inch lollipop-style pompoms to giant 15-inch 'dinner plate' blooms. Most varieties grow 4 to 5 feet tall.



If you have ever been to a Stokesley Show, which sadly has been cancelled for a second year because of the Covid19, you will probably have seen the Horticultural Marquee filled with exotic and amazing dahlia blossoms. These hugely varietal flowers are a collector's dream, with little starburst blooms to plate-sized flowers in every hue imaginable. Dahlias are classified according to flower shape and petal arrangement.

If I had to label flowers as members of a royal family, I would have to start with the most classic of flowers - the rose. The rose would be the Queen of the garden. Lilies would be the knights. Begonias, tulips, daffodils and freesias would be the princes, princesses and ladies in waiting. Which flower would be the king you ask? That would be the dahlia. Dahlia has to be the king of the garden. With its huge selection of flowers in a myriad of colours, shapes, styles, and heights, dahlia is the King of the Summer Garden.

Dahlias are tubers that look like potato tubers. Both dahlia flowers and tubers are edible. The tubers taste like a cross between a potato and a radish! From these tubers grow dahlia stalks that produce beautiful dahlia blooms. While many flowers have a hard time handling the hot summer temperatures, dahlias thrive and pump out non-stop blooms all summer long.

There is a book titled 'Strangers in the Garden: The Secret Lives of Our Favourite Flowers' by Andrew Smith, that gives the history and origins of popular flowers, and how they ended up in our home gardens. One of the chapters is on Dahlias, titled 'Curse of the Dahlia'. Bloody human sacrifices, a duped smuggler, and a possessive empress mark the dahlia's stormy passage to fame and fortune. This chapter is extensive and traces the lore, significance, and history of the dahlia as a favoured flower all over the world, starting from Mexico, then to Spain, France, Germany, and to England.

Andrew Smith is such a theatrical writer that he makes the story of the dahlia come alive as if the flower were a person, a tumultuous person at that, too. When you read the chapter on the dahlia flower, you can picture a blockbuster Hollywood movie on the story of this flower!

*"Some people find dahlias distasteful. Their fulsome blooms, top-heavy with an excess of petals, are considered vulgar....the conspicuous flaunting of so much provocative beauty can evoke a sense of foreboding. Perhaps the flower, nurtured and loved by tragic Empress Josephine, who traded on her looks but lost Napoleon, is destined to be suffused forever with her jealous melancholy. Certainly the brutal destruction of a sophisticated civilization paved the way for the dahlia's introduction to the West. Oh, the troubles it's seen!"*

## The origins of the dahlia. The Aztecs

The origins of the dahlia date back to the Aztecs who called themselves Mexica. This region is today part of Mexico and Guatemala. Rough mountain landscapes of Mexico and South America were nothing for this gorgeous flower, and it thrived proudly at the top of the world. During the 16th century, the Spanish conquistadors arrived here and in addition to conquering the Aztecs, they also brought with them botanists, whose jobs were to bring back plants from the New World for Spain.

The dahlia was 'The War Flower' to the Aztecs, also known as the 'Dahlia coccinea'. It was called the War Flower based on a myth surrounding the plant. The Aztec gardeners recounted the myth to Spanish botanist Francisco Hernandez:

"The Earth Goddess Serpent Woman was ordered by the sky gods to impale a flower of Dahlia coccinea on the sharp point of a maguey leaf and to hold both to her heart all night. The next morning she gave birth to Uizilopochtli, he was god, fully grown, fully armed, and with a thirst for blood from the flowers' eight blood-red rays."



The Aztecs also shared with Spanish botanists the 'Dahlia imperialis', which was known as the Hollow Pipe. This was a tree dahlia that grew to heights of 20 feet or more. The Aztecs used the hollow stems of these dahlia plants to construct an aqueduct of sorts to carry water over long distances.

What is fascinating is that Aztecs shared with Spanish botanists knowledge of dahlia hybridization as well. The Aztecs had knowledge of how to breed and hybridize dahlias, how to create multiple varieties, and they classified dahlias based on colour, fragrance, shape and form, thus demonstrating their advanced botanical knowledge. Aztecs grew hundreds of varieties of dahlias and used them for medicinal purposes.

### Empress Josephine the Champion of the dahlia flower

The story of how Empress Josephine (1763 – 1814) became the champion of the dahlia flower in Europe is an interesting one as well. According to Andrew Smith, as the 18th century came to an end, the Spanish were entrenched in Mexico and they had a monopoly on a particular dye that was uniquely found in Mexico in the Mexican carmine grana insect. The female dried insects were used to make an intense red dye known as cochineal. At this time, French tapestry and fabrics were well known for their craftsmanship all over Europe, and the French needed this intense red dye to enhance their fabric. As the French got tired of relying on the Spanish to supply them with this coveted red dye, the French Minister to Mexico decided to smuggle a few of the carmine grana insects to France. Along with this shipment of insects inadvertently came a large batch of dahlia tubers. When this shipment arrived in France, the insects had died but the dahlia tubers survived.

Interestingly the Mexicans the French Minister bribed to smuggle the insects used dahlia tubers on purpose instead of cactus plants. Without the juicy cactus leaves to chew on, the insects died leaving only dahlia tubers in the shipment.

But the French Minister turned this disaster into an opportunity. He offered these dahlia tubers to Empress Josephine, Napoleon Bonaparte's Queen at the time. Empress Josephine was an avid gardener. She had a life-long love of flowers from a young age and grew an extensive array of plants and flowers. Under her expertise, these dahlia tubers thrived and bloomed prolifically. They soon became the envy of everyone. But she guarded these dahlia plants and wanted them to be exclusively hers. However a Polish Count who was visiting her

home bribed a lady in waiting and one of the gardeners to dig up over 100 dahlia plants and took them with him. Empress Josephine was so angry at this thievery and at the loss of her exclusivity to these sought after dahlias that she ordered all the remainder of the dahlia tubers to be dug up and ground into mulch.

Soon after her death at the age of 51, Josephine's dahlias became more common and a popular plant in Germany. By 1826, over 60 varieties were recorded.

### **The Brits take the dahlia to the next level and make it popular globally**

It is the British however that embraced the dahlia and took it to the next level of popularity. Dahlias worked perfectly within the flamboyant Victorian style of gardening and gardeners started using them extensively in English landscapes. Dahlias became even more sought after, and by the 1900s, Dahlia Societies had started forming all over England to hold dahlia competitions for who could grow the biggest and best dahlia. Today the dahlia is as popular as ever all over the world.

### **Dahlia – Secret message**

Every flower has a secret message hidden behind it that helps us understand the nature of a certain flower. Sometimes these messages are straight forward and other times we have to look deeper into the symbolic meaning of a flower to figure it out. The Dahlia was named the national emblem of Mexico in 1963 & given the invasive impact of Europe upon the lands of central Mexico, there's a certain satisfaction to be taken from the fact that the Dahlia is said to symbolise grace under pressure. The dahlia flower is telling you to ignore all the obstacles and to keep your head focused on success. Even though there are many obstacles along the way, this beautiful flower is showing us how to overcome them and still thrive from the ground.

An old saying goes that Christians are like tea bags; if you want to know what is inside us, just put us in hot water!

Where did the phrase "Grace under Pressure" first gain notoriety? According to one author, the origins have their roots in Ernest Hemingway. Dorothy Parker, writing a profile piece about Hemingway, asked him "Exactly what do you mean by 'guts'?" & Hemingway replied, "I mean, grace under pressure."

Guts? Like bravery? Courage?

After hearing this phrase used by a sports commentator during one of the Olympic events, I've really been pondering it. Grace under Pressure. What does that look like?

How does one hold up under both the day-to-day pressures of life, and the bigger challenges we all face from time to time? We see many of the Olympic athletes "holding up" under tremendous pressure to Bring Home the Gold. It's been a fascinating study in human nature to watch individuals and teams as they face these pressures, each striving to do their very best.

We as Christ followers need to think this subject through carefully. What do we teach the world about Grace under Pressure? The world is watching. What is our reaction to the daily stresses, and to the larger difficulties we face?

Do we look to our God, the author and giver of grace or do we look to our own strength to stand up, to push forward, to "succeed", whatever that is. Do we fail to recognize that in this world, our only hope is that we have been given the gift to be able to go to our God when in need of Grace under Pressure.

**In John 1:16 we read:** "For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace." What an amazing verse. The grace we receive is from His fullness - the "all" that God is. He is the 'I AM'. And it is from His fullness that we have all received the amazing gift of grace. But not only grace - grace multiplied. Grace upon grace.

As the Olympics 2021 come to a close, we can be grateful to have been reminded that it is God that gives Grace under Pressure. We could not live this life without it.

'Before me, even as behind, God is, and all is well.' (John Greenleaf Whittier)