

Dahlia pinnata

[Synonyms : *Dahlia purpurea*, *Dahlia rosea*, *Dahlia superflua*, *Dahlia variabilis*, *Georgina variabilis*]

DAHLIA is a perennial. Native to Mexico it has pale purple flowers.

It is also known as *Bunga sarang* (Malay), Callow root, *Dahlie* (German), *Edeldahlie* (German), Garden dahlia, *Garten-Dahlie* (German), *Georgina*, *Georgína premenlivá* (Slovak), *Georgine* (German), *Jiřina zahradní* (Czech), *Jiřinka proměnlivá* (Czech), Pinnate dahlia, and *Sommardahlia* (Swedish); and in flower language is said to be a symbol of dignity, elegance, forever yours, good taste (single), instability, and pomp.

It is now cultivated in several forms and many colours.

Pinnata is a botanical reference to the leaf-shape meaning ‘a feathery arrangement of leaflets on each side of the common stalk’.

On the European continental mainland the dahlia is often known by the name *Georgina*.

The Navajo North American Indians extracted a yellow-orange dye from the roots and flowers.

The dahlia arrived in Europe from Mexico in 1789. Seeds were sent to the Abbé Cavanilles in Madrid with the help of the Spanish Superintendent of the Botanic Gardens in Mexico City, Vicente de Cervantes (1755 or 1759-1829). It was the Abbé who named the plants that, for him, were primarily a food crop as it was known that the Columbian Tunebo Indians ate the tubers. As however their taste was not pleasing to European palates its cultivation on that Continent was minimal until the early 19th Century. Then in France the Empress Joséphine (1763-1814) fell for the beauty of the flowers. Dahlias were grown in her gardens at Malmaison and initially their cultivation was confined to the French Royal Gardens. Such restrictions were bound to create enthusiasm and desire as one of the stories of the time illustrates. It was said that a Lady-in-Waiting to the Empress (some say the Countess of Bougainville) persuaded her lover to bribe the gardener for some roots so that she could grow the flowers herself. Full of her success, she foolishly boasted about her exploits and this reached the ears of the Empress. Promptly Empress Joséphine had all her own dahlia stock destroyed, dismissed the Lady-in-Waiting concerned and sacked the gardener.

Separately it has also been alleged that the dahlia was first introduced to Britain in the late 18th Century by the then Marchioness of Bute. Unfortunately these initial plants were lost and in 1804 more were introduced by the beautiful Elizabeth Vassall (1770-1845), the then Lady Holland. Lord Holland wrote to her

The dahlia you brought to our isle,
Your praises for ever shall speak.
Mid gardens as sweet as your smile,
And in colour as bright as your cheek.

Sadly however these also died after flowering and following the Treaty of Paris in 1814 (which led the following year to the Congress of Vienna and the redrawn map of Europe after all the Napoleonic devastation) fresh plants were obtained from France. Some authorities claim that some of the first of these plants to arrive in the Country were passed to the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew in 1798.

In some parts of Mexico the tubers are still eaten as a vegetable. Yet when the plants first

entered Britain unsuccessful attempts were made (as on the European continental mainland) to introduce this new food to the sceptical British public. After processing dahlia tubers release a substance (that can also be isolated from chicory roots (*Cichorium intybus*)) that has sometimes been called Diabetic Sugar or Atlanta Starch. It has a sweet and pleasant taste and is used in diabetic food products. It is the birthday flower for 24th August.