



Dahlia: The Flower of Mexico
by Dianne Reitan with Martin Kral

Sometime in the last year or so, I first heard or read that the dahlia was the flower of Mexico. I casually mentioned this to my husband, Dave, and he nonchalantly mention this fact to one of his friends during a conversation about my passion for growing dahlias. These two friends belong to a local lodge and they had both noticed during their comings and goings that families liked to book the space for their quinceañera gatherings. In Latin American cultures, it is customary to celebrate a girl's 15th birthday. In Spanish, the girl celebrating her 15th birthday is called a quinceañera; in English, primarily in the United States, quinceañera is used to refer to the celebrations and honors surrounding the special occasion.

One day my husband suggested that I try and market my retail dahlias to the Hispanic community here in Colorado Springs. If you have seen any of these celebrations to mark the transition from childhood to womanhood, some of them are quite elaborate and resemble a wedding! I actually got to see an event planning company set-up a quinceañera in this lodge building and they were going all-out with fabric covered chairs, candelabra centerpieces and a dance floor complete with a band. Thousands of dollars worth of red and white roses were displayed on the tables and throughout the room. I felt like my jaw hit the floor - it was that beautiful.

I had never heard of these coming-of-age parties nor did I do any research about Mexico and their official national flower. But when the bridal store right down the street from my flower farm was advertising that they now have quinceañera dresses, it got me thinking. What if we borrow one of their dresses, get a willing model, and photograph her with all kinds of dahlias at the flower farm that is located next to a grove of century-old trees? This would give us some marketing images to get folks in town who are planning these festivities to talk about using dahlias instead of carnations, lilies or peonies. We had a blast doing the photoshoot - the images here in this newsletter are from that golden-hour time with @beverlykphotography.



While I thought combining the quinceañera and the dahlia was a clever idea, I found it odd that not one Hispanic person I talked to had ever heard that the dahlia is honored in Mexico. When I mentioned to my Dahlia Talk co-author Martin Kral that I wanted to write about the flower of Mexico, he wasted no time debunking a bunch of dahlia history myths, especially about the dahlia's backstory in Mexico, that is commonly found on Google, ChatGPT and even in some reference materials.

Although the dahlia is the official national flower for Mexico, it all came about because in 1963 there was a horticultural exhibition in Mexico City that gave the government this inspiration. Then President Adolfo Mateos announced the dahlia (and we have copies of that proclamation) and the media have similarly joined up - although the most important Mexican native flower is the marigold in its traditions. Large plantings of dahlias in parks and along the famous Avenida Reforma appeared. Regrettably, subsequent administrations gave little attention to dahlia culture. It seems that Mexicans have not embraced this floricultural symbol as the declaration had hoped. To this day, dahlias in Mexican gardens tend to be the hybridized modern varieties.

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I first researched this topic and up came a reference that ADS officials had instigated their Mexican hosts to consider naming a national flower, but we lack evidence that gringos had anything to do with the naming. Also, the Mexican Dahlia Association didn't start up for another 30 years, so the enthusiasm for the dahlia was quite weak in response. Martin Kral



The Mexican Dahlia Association is a non-profit devoted to the promotion, use, cultivation, and conservation of the genus Dahlia. In Spanish you'll also see it referenced as "Acocoxóchitl"

(from Nahuatl) in some contexts. It was formally established in 1992 by researchers and academics from different Mexican institutions who shared an interest in the Dahlia — particularly its native heritage, ornamental value, and potential uses. Recently I remembered how I came to learn about this subject. At the ADS National Show in Wenatchee in 2024, Martin and his good friend Lupita, the president of the Mexican Dahlia Association, gave a talk about her decades-long reign at the head of this organization and some of her favorite projects. [Click here](#) to read Martin's copyrighted work on Dahlia Myths and Aztec Mythology.

The dahlia is native to the highlands of Mexico, where it has grown naturally for centuries. When Spanish explorers arrived in the 16th century, they were captivated by the dahlia's striking form and resilience. They brought the plant back to Europe, where it became a sensation in botanical circles. Over time, European horticulturalists developed countless varieties of the dahlia, turning it into a beloved garden flower across the continent. Yet, despite its global fame, the dahlia's true origins remained deeply Mexican. By the early 20th century, Mexico was in the midst of redefining its national identity after the Revolution. Artists, intellectuals, and politicians sought to celebrate native culture and heritage, turning to symbols that reflected the country's pre-Columbian past and natural beauty. The dahlia, with its indigenous roots and breathtaking diversity, emerged as a perfect representation of Mexican resilience and artistry and thus inspired the declaration over 60 years ago.

I really can't tell whether or not most of our Latin friends grow or appreciate the dahlia. I still like the idea of 15-year old ladies having the dahlia at their quinceañeras if they are celebrating in late summer or early fall. Maybe we can all ask our Hispanic friends what they think of this idea and plant some dahlias in our backyard specifically for the special event. ADS may or may not have been part of why the dahlia become the official flower of Mexico, but maybe those of us affiliated with ADS can inspire families who have a quinceañera in their future, to have a piece of Mexican floricultural history at the table.



On a side note, our current ADS President Mark Oldenkamp and Dan Baulig, ADS Store Manager, shared photos with me of the ADS National Show in September at the Chicago Botanic Gardens. I heard it was fabulous and I was sad to have missed it. But Mark told me the next ADS National Show will be held at the end of August in 2026 in Grand Rapids, MI. The Western Michigan Dahlia Society will be hosting the show at the Frederick Meijer

Gardens and Sculpture Park. I have never been to this state and so I have put this show on my calendar! Maybe you can plan to come, too.



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