

Unpublished letter

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Dear George

I was much intrigued by Dr Elizabeth McClintock's essay entitled "Dahlias in Cultivation" in the Fall 1993 issue of the magazine, in which I learned that the introduction of the genus to Europe via Spain, in 1789, followed its discovery by the Spanish, two centuries earlier, in Mexico (New Spain).

It was, of course, Philip II, "*Rey de España y de las Indias Occidentales*" (King of Spain and the Americas), who sent Francisco Hernández to study the natural history of this overseas portion of the *monarquía española*, which he ruled from 1556 to 1598, and not, as your author would have us believe, his son Philip III (1598-1621).

The princely avocation of garden-making in the peninsula that found its highest expression under Spain's Muslim rulers, and which was to be continued by the Spanish Habsburgs' Bourbon successors, was maintained, with genuine passion, by Philip II, who created around his palaces at Aranjuez, to the south of his new capital of Madrid, and at the Escorial to the north, significant gardens.

Describing the King's apartments at the monastery-residence of the Escorial, in 1597, a courtier noted that "the fourth room is where his Majesty usually takes his meals, hung all about with fine drawings of gardens in perspective, and of plants and herbs and flowers from the Indies...."

Like his Islamic predecessors, Philip II prized flowers for their colour, their fragrance, their novelty and their medicinal properties. Long after the expulsion or forced conversion of the Moors, he kept alive the tradition of mixed planting (*plantación libre*), which distinguished the garden of the Hispano-Arab garden artist from the prevailing styles in the Spanish realms in Italy and the Low Countries, by which he was also influenced.

It is not generally known that the austere, cruciform Patio de los Evangelistas at the Escorial, with its cupolaed central fountain and four compartments, today geometrically patterned with hedges of clipped box, was once planted by the numerous garden experts maintained by Philip II with a variety of flowering plants. Among the sixty-eight species listed by Doctor Juan Alonso de Almela in 1592 were a number of recently introduced plants sent from the Americas by Francisco Hernández. (Apropos, was the discoverer of the dahlia, among other plants, both a physician and a botanist to the King, as is implied in the article?)

Given the ardent connoisseurship of Hernández's royal patron, whose favourite flower was the musk rose, it is even more remarkable that seeds of this wondrous genus only found their way to Spain when they did, some two hundred years later. Vicente Cervantes, the royal botanist who returned from Mexico with them was one of several plantmen whose work attracted royal support. Under the patronage of the Crown, the boundaries of knowledge were greatly extended by means of plant-hunting expeditions to different parts of the globe and the scientific study and propagation of an extensive list of exotic plants, among them the dahlia.

The Royal Botanic Garden in Mexico that Dr McClintock writes was "ill-fated" must be compared with the one in Madrid, where the dahlia was first cultivated, which is accounted one of the most notable institutions with which Spain's benevolent eighteenth-century despots improved their capital. The first true botanical garden in Madrid was founded in 1755 during the brief reign of Ferdinand VI (1746-59) and, subsequently, re-opened in another location, in 1781, by his step-brother Charles III (1759-88).

If, as Dr McClintock tells us, Cervantes was despatched to Mexico in 1789, it must have been as a result of an initiative taken, not by Charles III, but by his son and heir, who succeeded him on the throne as Charles IV in 1788. As Prince of Asturias, this king made a lasting contribution to Spanish horticulture by creating, at Aranjuez, the garden that is still named for him, "Jardin del Principe", which, in its imaginative blending of the useful and the beautiful exemplified the ruling watchwords of the Age of Enlightenment: "*lo util es lo bello*".

It must have been this veritable buzz of activity in Spain, when the Royal Botanic Garden in Madrid was one of the most famous gardens in Europe, that caused Carolus Linnaeus (1707-78), the great Swedish author of the universal classification of plants, to send his favourite pupil Petrus Löfling there to make an inventory of the country's species. He was also moved to call Spain the "garden of the orb".

The memory of Linnaeus is preserved, indirectly, as Dr McClintock tells us, in the naming of the first dahlia to be cultivated in Spain for another of his pupils, Andreas Dahl of Sweden. American garden visitors to Spain should on no account miss the Hortus Botanicus Marimurtra, the beautiful scientific garden established on the Costa Brava in the province of Gerona by the German Carlos Faust (1874-1952), who dedicated a classical pavilion overlooking the Mediterranean Sea to Linnaeus. Among the treasured possessions in the library of the Fundacion Carlos Faust is preserved a copy of the complete works of the "father of botany" first translated into Spanish in 1784 by the Catalan plantsman Antonio Palau y Verdera.

Ranked high among Palau's distinguished contemporaries was the Valencian botanist Antonio José Cavanilles (1745-1804), identified by Dr McClintock as "of the garden's staff" when he grew plants from the seeds of the dahlia at the Royal Botanic Garden in Madrid, but who is known to have been the Director when he first described the genus in 1790, one year after it had been introduced.

Of the three tree dahlias reported to be in cultivation, Dr McClintock writes, "*D. excelsa*, so far as is known, has been collected only once, in 1834. It has been looked for since but with no success. Because so little is known of this dahlia, cultivated plants given the name probably are *D. imperialis*", which the author describes elsewhere as "the most striking" of the twenty-seven species of *Dahlia* in cultivation.

Although I was not on hand in the month of December to see for myself this prodigy of nature in full bloom, I was told on good authority that the principal patio of a private residence in the maritime province of Cádiz, which I visited in May, has splendid specimens of *D. excelsa* - or could they be *D. imperialis*? - which grow to a height of nineteen feet ("*seis metros de altura*") and, with pink-shading-to lilac petals, put forth flowers that are thirteen inches across ("*de treinta centímetros de diámetro*")!

Finally, of particular interest, perhaps, to subscribers who toured Spain in 1993 and/or who may be contemplating the announced tour of Brazil in 1994, the recent restoration of the Royal Botanic Garden in Madrid, which is credited with having given fresh impetus to the ancient art of horticulture in the peninsula, was largely the work of Leandro Silva Delgado, Spain's leading contemporary *paisajista*. An Iberian-American, who was born in Uruguay and trained as an architect, Sr Silva first became interested in landscape design through his early association in Brazil with the garden architect Roberto Burle Marx.

Yours sincerely