



## TREE DAHLIA (*Dahlia imperialis*) - A BLOOMING MARVEL FOR AGROFORESTRY AND ECOLOGICAL HARMONY IN THE NILGIRIS

P. Jaisridhar<sup>1\*</sup>, R. Shanmugam<sup>1</sup>, S. Manivasakan<sup>1</sup>, B. Vinothkumar<sup>1</sup>, P. Raja<sup>1</sup>  
and I. Ponsneka<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>ICAR-Krishi Vigyan Kendra, TNAU, The Nilgiris

<sup>2</sup>PG Scholar, Department of Agricultural Extension & Rural Sociology, TNAU, Coimbatore

\*Corresponding Author Mail ID: [jaisridhar@tnau.ac.in](mailto:jaisridhar@tnau.ac.in)

The Tree Dahlia (*Dahlia imperialis*), also known as the "Queen of Autumn," is a towering perennial plant native to Central America. Known for its striking height and vibrant pink to lavender blooms, this majestic plant flourishes in tropical and subtropical climates, making it an ideal species for the Nilgiris' unique hilly terrain. With its ability to thrive in cooler high-altitude regions, the Tree Dahlia has become a notable ornamental plant in the Nilgiris, enhancing the region's biodiversity and aesthetic value.

In the Nilgiris, the Tree Dahlia is increasingly recognized not just for its ornamental appeal but also for its potential role in Agroforestry systems. Its rapid growth, ability to provide partial shade, and capacity to attract pollinators like bees and butterflies make it a valuable addition to the agricultural landscape. By supporting ecological balance and promoting pollination, the Tree Dahlia contributes to the sustainability of the Nilgiris' rich yet fragile ecosystem.

### Botanical Description

Scientific Name: *Dahlia imperialis*

Kingdom: Plantae

Order: Asterales

Family: Asteraceae

Genus: Dahlia

Species: *D. imperialis*

Common Names: Tree Dahlia, Giant Dahlia

### Morphology:

The plant's hollow stems resemble bamboo, contributing to its impressive height. Leaves are bipinnate or tripinnate with serrated edges, contributing to a lush, tropical appearance. The large, pendant-like flowers are typically 8–10 cm in diameter, with shades

ranging from pale lavender to white or pink, depending on the variety.



### Habitat:

Native to Central America, particularly Guatemala and Mexico. It thrives in tropical and subtropical climates and is well-suited for elevations above 1,500 meters.

### Growth Habit:

It is a tall, herbaceous perennial that can grow up to 6–10 meters high.

- **Flowers:** The plant produces large, daisy-like flowers, typically lavender or pale pink with yellow centers, blooming in late autumn and winter.
- **Leaves:** Compound leaves with serrated edges, arranged alternately on long, bamboo-like stems.

### History

Native to the highlands of Central America, *Dahlia imperialis* was cultivated by the Aztecs, who called the plant *acocoxochitl*,

meaning “water cane flower.” Its hollow stems were used as pipes and water carriers, showcasing its utilitarian importance alongside its ornamental value. It was introduced to Europe in the 16th century as an ornamental plant and has since spread to many parts of the world, including the Nilgiris in India, where it flourishes due to favorable conditions.

#### **Cultural Spread:**

European explorers introduced the dahlia genus to Europe in the late 16th century. Although garden dahlias gained prominence for hybridization, *Dahlia imperialis* retained its niche appeal due to its towering structure.

#### **Modern Popularity:**

Tree Dahlia has gained popularity in regions like the Himalayas, Nilgiris, and other temperate to subtropical climates, where it blooms just before winter sets in.



#### **Uses and Applications**

##### **Ornamental:**

- Highly valued for landscaping in hilly areas and large gardens due to its grandeur.
- Its late-blooming season provides much-needed color in gardens when other plants are dormant.

##### **Medicinal Applications:**

Indigenous tribes in Central America use its tubers and leaves to prepare decoctions for respiratory and digestive ailments.

#### **Current Research:**

Some studies are investigating potential antimicrobial and antioxidant properties of its extracts.

#### **Food Uses:**

In some regions, the tubers of Dahlia species, including *D. imperialis*, are used as a food source. The tubers are rich in insulin, a dietary fiber that promotes gut health. However, this practice is less common with *D. imperialis* compared to other Dahlia species.

#### **Ecological Role:**

Tree Dahlia acts as a nectar source for bees, butterflies, and other pollinators, especially during the late-autumn blooming period. It provides shelter and resting sites for birds and insects due to its height and dense foliage.

#### **Cultivation and Care**

- **Soil:** Tree Dahlia prefers well-drained, fertile soils with good organic matter.
- **Light:** It thrives in full sun but can tolerate partial shade.
- **Water:** Tree Dahlia requires moderate watering; excessive water logging can damage the roots.
- **Propagation:** Propagated through cuttings or tuberous roots.

**Blooming Period:** Late autumn to early winter.

#### **Interesting Facts**

- *Dahlia imperialis* is a close relative of the popular garden dahlia but differs significantly due to its height and bloom season.
- It has a rich history of being admired by ancient civilizations for its towering beauty and adaptability.

#### **Cultivation Practices**

##### **Propagation:**

**Stem Cuttings:** Stems cut from mature plants can be rooted easily in moist soil.

**Tubers:** Like other *Dahlia* species, it can also be propagated using tubers, though this method is slower for *D. imperialis*.

**Soil Requirements:**

Tree Dahlia thrives in fertile, loamy, and well-drained soil with a pH range of 6–7.5. Adding organic compost or manure improves flower production.

**Climate:**

The plant prefers cool, high-altitude climates with moderate rainfall. Although it is drought-tolerant, regular watering ensures better flowering.

**Pests and Diseases:**

**Common Pests:** Aphids, spider mites, and thrips may attack the leaves and flowers.

**Diseases:** Susceptible to fungal infections like powdery mildew and root rot if waterlogged.

**Maintenance:**

Pruning after flowering encourages healthier growth in the next season.

Staking may be needed to support its tall stems, especially in windy areas.

**Environmental and Agro-ecological Importance**

**Carbon Sequestration:** As a large perennial plant, *Dahlia imperialis* contributes to carbon sequestration, making it an eco-friendly addition to Agroforestry systems.

**Soil Stabilization:** Its extensive root system helps reduce soil erosion in sloping terrains like the Nilgiris.

**Biodiversity:** By supporting pollinators and providing habitat for wildlife, it contributes to local ecosystem stability.

**Interesting Facts**

**Symbolism:** Dahlias, including *D. imperialis*, symbolize elegance and dignity due to their bold appearance.

**Flowering Time:** Its blooms occur in autumn and winter, making it an iconic plant for seasonal transitions.

**Scientific Curiosity:** The hollow stems have been studied for potential applications in lightweight structural materials.

**Role of *Dahlia imperialis* in Agroforestry**

*Dahlia imperialis*, or Tree Dahlia, offers several benefits in agroforestry systems, particularly in hilly and temperate regions like the Nilgiris. Here's an analysis of its role:

**Soil Conservation and Stability**

**Root System:** The extensive fibrous root system of *D. imperialis* helps bind the soil, reducing erosion in sloping areas typical of the Nilgiris.

**Slope Protection:** It can be used as a hedge or intercropped with other vegetation to protect against landslides and stabilize terraces, especially during monsoon periods.

**Biodiversity Enhancement**

**Pollinator Habitat:** Late-season flowering provides nectar and pollen for bees, butterflies, and other insects when other flowering plants have ceased blooming. This supports pollinator populations vital for nearby agricultural crops.

**Shelter for Wildlife:** Its tall stature offers resting spots for birds and insects, creating a microhabitat within Agroforestry setups.

**Shade and Windbreak**

- **Shade:** Its height and dense foliage make it an effective shade plant, especially for shade-loving crops like coffee, cardamom, and certain vegetables grown in the Nilgiris.
- **Windbreak:** In windy areas, it acts as a protective barrier for more delicate crops, improving overall farm productivity.
- **Nutrient Recycling**
- **Mulching:** Leaves and pruned stems can be used as mulch, enriching the soil with organic matter.
- **Compost:** Fallen leaves and plant residues decompose quickly, contributing to soil fertility.

**Carbon Sequestration**

As a fast-growing perennial, *D. imperialis* captures and stores carbon, contributing to climate change mitigation. Its use in agroforestry systems enhances this benefit when paired with other perennials and trees.

### Specific Uses in the Nilgiris Ecosystem

The Nilgiris' unique topography and climate make *Dahlia imperialis* especially valuable:

#### Hill Agriculture

- **Companion Planting:** In Nilgiris' vegetable belts, *D. imperialis* can be intercropped with cabbage, cauliflower, and carrots. It helps in reducing wind damage and provides partial shade.
- **Boundary Planting:** Farmers can use it as a natural border around cultivated lands, marking boundaries while offering soil stabilization.

#### Organic Farming

The plant aligns well with organic farming systems:

**Pest Management:** Its dense foliage can deter certain pests, creating a natural barrier.

**Ecosystem Services:** Supports biodiversity, essential for organic farming practices.

#### Cultural and Aesthetic Value

Its striking appearance adds to the cultural and visual landscape of the Nilgiris, making it a favored choice for eco-tourism farms and homesteads.

#### Mitigation of Climate Extremes

With changing rainfall patterns in the Nilgiris, *D. imperialis* can buffer temperature extremes, improve microclimates, and aid in water conservation.

### Detailed Propagation Techniques

#### Propagation by Stem Cuttings

This is the most common and efficient method:

**Timing:** Take cuttings during late spring or early summer when the plant is actively growing.

**Selection:** Use 30–40 cm long cuttings from healthy, mature stems. Ensure the cutting includes at least two nodes.

#### Planting:

- Prepare a mix of sandy soil and compost for rooting.
- Insert cuttings at a depth of 10–12 cm and water lightly.

- Maintain partial shade until roots develop (2–3 weeks).

**Transplanting:** Move to the main field once roots are strong, spacing them 1.5–2 meters apart.

**Propagation by Tubers**

While slower, propagation via tubers is reliable:

**Harvesting Tubers:** Dig up tubers during the plant's dormant season (post-flowering).

**Storage:** Store tubers in a cool, dry place to prevent rot.

#### Planting

- Choose well-drained soil rich in organic matter.
- Plant tubers 5–8 cm deep with the bud facing upward.
- Space tubers 2 meters apart to allow for full growth.

#### Maintenance Tips

- **Watering:** Requires moderate watering during initial growth but is drought-tolerant once established.
- **Pruning:** Cut back old stems after flowering to encourage new growth.
- **Fertilization:** Apply compost or well-rotted manure during planting and once during the growing season.
- **Pest Control:** Use neem oil or organic sprays to control aphids and spider mites if infestations occur.

#### Integration into Agroforestry Models

In the Nilgiris, *Dahlia imperialis* can be included in:

- **Multi-Tier Systems:** Combine it with shorter shrubs, climbers, and ground crops for space optimization.
- **Alley Cropping:** Plant in rows between vegetables like potato or cabbage to improve microclimatic conditions and reduce erosion.
- **Home Gardens:** Useful for kitchen gardens, where it serves as both an ornamental and functional plant.

**Planting Schedule for *Dahlia imperialis*:** This schedule is tailored to the Nilgiris' climate and

farming practices, accounting for rainfall and the cropping seasons.

**Stage Activity Time-frame Site Preparation:** Clear and level the land, test soil for pH (6.0–7.5 is ideal), and enrich with compost or farmyard manure. February–March

**Planting:** Start planting cuttings or tubers at the onset of the pre-monsoon season to ensure good root establishment. April–May

**Weeding & Mulching:** Weed control and mulch application around the base of plants to retain moisture and reduce soil erosion. June–July

**Pruning & Maintenance:** Cut back old or excess growth after flowering to stimulate new shoots and improve structure. September–October

**Nutrient Management:** Apply organic fertilizers like vermicompost or bio-fertilizers to boost growth and flower production. Twice a year: Pre-monsoon (April) and Post-flowering (October).

**Harvesting Flowers:** Flowers can be collected for ornamental or pollination purposes. November–December

**Tubers Collection:** For propagation, collect tubers after flowering season, during dormancy. December–January

### Detailed Agroforestry Layout

This layout integrates *Dahlia imperialis* with typical crops and trees in the Nilgiris to maximize ecosystem services.

### Row Spacing and Placement

**Tree Dahlia Rows:** Spaced 2 meters apart in contour rows to control erosion and provide shade.

**Intercrops:** Plant vegetables like carrots, cabbages, or beans in the alleys.

**Companion Trees:** Combine with nitrogen-fixing trees such as *Gliricidia sepium* or *Albizia lebbek* for improved soil fertility.

### Example Layout

### Upper Slope (Windbreak/Boundary Planting):

- *Dahlia imperialis* in a staggered pattern to reduce wind damage.
- Eucalyptus or Silver Oak as a taller wind barrier.

### Mid-Slope (Alley Cropping):

- Alternate rows of *Dahlia imperialis* and vegetables.
- Integrate shade-loving crops like coffee or cardamom beneath *Dahlia imperialis*' canopy.

### Lower Slope (Moisture Conservation):

- Plant *Dahlia imperialis* to reduce runoff and stabilize soil.
- Intercrop with ginger or turmeric, which thrive in well-drained soils.

### Agroforestry Benefits

- **Year-Round Functionality:** *Dahlia imperialis* blooms when other plants might not, providing critical habitat for pollinators and aesthetic value during lean seasons.
- **Climate Adaptation:** Its drought tolerance and deep roots improve resilience in areas with erratic rainfall, as seen in the Nilgiris.
- **Income Diversification:** Flowering can be used for aesthetic or cultural purposes, creating alternative income streams for farmers.

### Conclusion

The Tree Dahlia (*Dahlia imperialis*), with its towering presence and vibrant blooms, is more than just an ornamental plant—it symbolizes the delicate balance between nature's beauty and its ecological purpose. In the context of the Nilgiris, a region renowned for its rich biodiversity and fragile ecosystem, the Tree Dahlia presents a unique opportunity to integrate ornamental and functional plants into agroforestry systems. Its adaptability to the hilly terrain and cooler climates of the Nilgiris makes it a suitable species to address both ecological and aesthetic needs. From an agroforestry perspective, the Tree Dahlia offers multiple benefits. Its rapid growth and ability to provide filtered shade make it a

valuable companion plant in multi-cropping systems. It can act as a windbreak in open fields, protecting vulnerable crops from strong winds and reducing soil erosion in sloping terrains. Moreover, its ability to flower profusely during autumn attracts a variety of pollinators, including bees, butterflies, and birds, thereby enhancing pollination services for surrounding crops and boosting agricultural productivity. These attributes position the Tree Dahlia as a vital ally for farmers seeking to improve biodiversity within their farms while maintaining a balance between productivity and ecological health.

In the Nilgiris, where the farming community often relies on traditional practices intertwined with modern challenges, the Tree Dahlia can serve as a bridge between tradition and innovation. Its ease of propagation through stem cuttings or tuberous roots makes it accessible to farmers with limited resources, while its ability to grow with minimal care ensures that it remains a low-maintenance addition to agroforestry systems. The plant's ability to thrive in organic farming practices aligns well with the growing emphasis on sustainable agriculture in the region.

Beyond its utility in agriculture, the Tree Dahlia contributes significantly to the ecological harmony of the Nilgiris. By providing food and habitat for various pollinators, it plays an essential role in maintaining the biodiversity that the region is known for. The plant's striking blooms also hold cultural significance, often used in local festivals and ceremonies, reinforcing its role in the social fabric of the community. Furthermore, its presence in home gardens and public spaces enhances the scenic beauty of the Nilgiris, supporting eco-tourism, which is a vital economic activity for the region.

However, for the Tree Dahlia to be effectively integrated into agroforestry and ecological systems, a strategic approach is essential. Awareness campaigns and workshops could help educate farmers and local communities about its benefits and propagation techniques. Demonstration farms showcasing its integration with other crops and trees could further encourage its adoption. Research institutions and environmental organizations in

the Nilgiris could also explore its potential uses beyond its current scope, such as in carbon sequestration or as a source of biomass.

In conclusion, the Tree Dahlia is not just a blooming marvel but also a beacon of hope for agroforestry and ecological harmony in the Nilgiris. Its multi-faceted contributions—ranging from supporting pollinators and protecting soil to enhancing the visual landscape—underscore its importance in sustainable land management practices. By embracing plants like the Tree Dahlia, the Nilgiris can set an example for other regions, demonstrating how biodiversity, agriculture, and community well-being can coexist and thrive together. With the right strategies and support, this humble yet magnificent plant can become an integral part of the Nilgiris' journey toward a more sustainable and harmonious future.

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