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Mutation Breeding in *Dianthus*: Engineering Beauty Through Science

Rajib Roychowdhury
International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT), Hyderabad - 502324, Telangana, India
*Corresponding author - rajibroychowdhury86@yahoo.com

Abstract

Mutation breeding has emerged as a powerful tool for the genetic improvement of *Dianthus* (carnation), a globally important ornamental crop valued for its aesthetic appeal and commercial significance. This approach involves the induction of heritable genetic variation using physical and chemical mutagens to develop novel traits without altering the overall genetic makeup of elite cultivars.

In *Dianthus*, mutation breeding has successfully generated a wide range of desirable characteristics, including unique flower colors, improved floral quality, enhanced plant architecture, and increased productivity. The technique has also contributed to expanding the genetic base of the crop, providing valuable resources for future breeding programs.

Despite challenges such as the random nature of mutations and time-intensive selection processes, recent integration with genomics, molecular tools, and artificial intelligence is improving efficiency and precision. Overall, mutation breeding continues to play a crucial role in advancing *Dianthus* improvement and sustaining innovation in floriculture.

Introduction: a flower that speaks the language of color

Among the vast diversity of ornamental plants, *Dianthus*, popularly known as carnation, holds a special place in gardens, bouquets, and cultural symbolism. From soft pinks to deep reds and even variegated patterns, carnations have long captivated human imagination. Their elegance, long vase life, and striking diversity make them one of the most commercially important cut flowers worldwide, ranking among the top ornamental species cultivated globally. But the vibrant diversity seen today is not merely a gift of nature - it is also a result of human ingenuity. Behind every novel shade or improved cultivar lies decades of careful selection, breeding, and increasingly, biotechnology. One of the most fascinating and effective approaches among these methods is mutation breeding, a technique that allows breeders to introduce desirable variation in a controlled manner. Mutation breeding in *Dianthus* represents a unique blend of art and science, where genetic changes are intentionally induced to create new traits, particularly those related to flower color, form, and productivity. This article explores how mutation breeding has revolutionized *Dianthus* improvement, its principles, methods, achievements, and its promising future in the era of genomics.

Understanding mutation breeding: creating diversity with precision

Mutation breeding is based on a simple but powerful concept - inducing heritable changes in plant DNA to generate variation. Unlike conventional breeding, which relies on recombination of existing genetic variation through crossing, mutation breeding creates entirely new variations at the genetic level. Mutations may occur naturally, but their frequency is often too low to be useful for breeding. To accelerate the process, breeders use mutagenic agents such as radiation or chemicals to induce changes in the genome. One of the biggest advantages of mutation breeding is its ability to modify a specific trait while retaining the desirable characteristics of an elite cultivar. This is particularly valuable in ornamentals, where aesthetic traits such as flower color, size, and symmetry are of paramount importance. Over the years, mutation breeding has contributed to the development of thousands of crop varieties globally, including many ornamental species. It has been especially successful in floriculture, where even small visible changes can create significant market value.

Why *Dianthus* is a perfect candidate for mutation breeding

High commercial value and consumer demand: *Dianthus* is among the most widely cultivated ornamental flowers, appreciated for its use in bouquets, floral arrangements, and decorative landscaping. The global floriculture market continuously demands new varieties with novel colors and improved traits, making *Dianthus* an ideal candidate for breeding innovations. In the ornamental sector, consumer preferences are dynamic. A slight shift in petal color or pattern can significantly influence market trends. Mutation breeding enables rapid generation of such variations, helping breeders keep up with demand.

Ease of vegetative propagation: One of the key advantages of *Dianthus* is its ability to be propagated vegetatively. This means that once a desirable mutant is identified, it can be quickly multiplied and maintained without genetic change. This characteristic makes mutation breeding particularly efficient in ornamentals, as the selected mutants can be directly propagated and commercialized without extensive breeding cycles.

Visible and economically relevant traits: Unlike many field crops where traits like yield or stress tolerance require extensive evaluation, ornamental plants such as *Dianthus* exhibit clearly visible traits - flower color, size, fragrance, and shape. These traits can be easily screened in early generations, allowing breeders to efficiently identify promising mutants. This reduces both time and cost involved in developing new cultivars.

Genetic flexibility and variability: *Dianthus* exhibits a high degree of genetic variability, particularly in traits related to pigmentation and floral morphology. This inherent flexibility enhances the effectiveness of mutation breeding, as induced mutations can produce a wide range of phenotypic outcomes.

Methods of mutation breeding in *Dianthus*

Chemical mutagens: Chemical mutagens are widely used in mutation breeding due to their effectiveness in inducing point mutations. Commonly used chemicals include Ethyl Methane Sulphonate (EMS), Colchicine and Maleic Hydrazide (MH). These chemicals alter DNA by causing base substitutions or chromosomal changes. In *Dianthus*, such treatments have been applied to seeds, leaves, and even in vitro cultures to generate variability. Studies have demonstrated that different concentrations of chemical mutagens can significantly influence plant traits such as flowering time, plant height, and flower size, indicating their potential in creating useful variability.

Physical mutagens: Physical mutagens, particularly gamma rays and X-rays, are commonly used in ornamental breeding. Gamma irradiation is especially popular because of its relatively consistent mutagenic effect. Radiation induces changes in DNA by causing breaks in chromosomes or altering gene sequences. The treated plant materials are then grown and evaluated for desirable mutations. Physical mutagenesis has been widely used to generate new flower colors and patterns in ornamentals, including carnations.

***In vitro* mutation breeding:** The integration of tissue culture techniques has greatly enhanced mutation breeding efficiency. In vitro mutagenesis allows handling large populations in limited space, rapid propagation of mutants, and early screening of desirable traits. This method is particularly useful for vegetatively propagated plants like *Dianthus*, where maintaining genetic uniformity is crucial.

Selection and Evaluation of Mutants

Mutation breeding is not merely about inducing mutations - it is equally about screening and selection. After mutagen treatment, plants are grown across generations - M_1 generation (Initial mutated plants), M_2 generation (where mutations become visible and selectable), and subsequent generations (stabilization and evaluation). In *Dianthus*, breeders examine traits such as flower number per plant, petal length and size, flower color and pattern, plant growth and branching, seed characteristics, etc. Only a small fraction of mutations are beneficial. Therefore, careful and systematic selection is critical to ensure that only the most promising mutants are advanced.

Types of mutations observed in *Dianthus*

Flower color mutations: Perhaps the most striking outcome of mutation breeding in *Dianthus* is the creation of new flower colors. Mutations often affect pigment biosynthesis pathways, particularly those related to flavonoids and anthocyanins. In carnations, changes in gene expression associated with pigment production can lead to variations in color intensity, hue, and pattern.

Morphological changes: Mutations can also influence plant morphology, resulting in dwarf or compact plants, altered petal shape, and increased number of flowers. Such traits are highly desirable for both ornamental and commercial purposes.

Physiological and developmental traits: Mutation breeding may also lead to improvements in flowering time, vase life and stress tolerance. These traits enhance the overall performance and marketability of *Dianthus* cultivars.

Bud mutations: nature's own experiment: Not all mutations are artificially induced. *Dianthus* is well-known for bud mutations, also called "sports," where spontaneous genetic changes occur in a specific part of the plant. Such mutations can result in distinct flower colors or patterns. Interestingly, entire series of cultivars have been developed from a single plant through continuous bud mutations, demonstrating nature's own role in creating diversity. Breeders often capitalize on these natural variations by selecting and propagating them, integrating them into breeding programs.

Achievements and success stories in mutation breeding

Mutation breeding has played a transformative role in the improvement of *Dianthus* cultivars, leading to remarkable advancements in ornamental quality and commercial value. One of the most prominent achievements is the development of novel color varieties, where induced mutations have generated a wide spectrum of unique floral patterns including variegated petals, bi-colored flowers, and unusual shades that extend beyond naturally occurring diversity. In addition to color innovation, mutation breeding has significantly enhanced key floral traits such as increased flower size, improved stalk length, and a higher number of blooms per plant, all of which contribute to greater market appeal and productivity. Furthermore, this approach has broadened the genetic base of *Dianthus*, creating a rich reservoir of variability that breeders can exploit for future improvement programs. Together, these advancements highlight the critical role of mutation breeding in shaping modern *Dianthus* cultivation and sustaining innovation in the floriculture industry.

Challenges and limitations

Despite its significant advantages, mutation breeding in *Dianthus* is associated with several challenges that can limit its efficiency and predictability. One of the primary constraints is the random nature of mutations, as genetic changes occur unpredictably, making desirable traits relatively rare and necessitating the screening of large populations. Additionally, mutations can sometimes lead to undesirable effects, including reduced plant vigor, altered fertility, or compromised overall performance, which may hinder their practical utility. The effectiveness of mutation breeding also depends heavily on the precise dosage of mutagens; excessive exposure can result in severe damage or plant lethality, while insufficient exposure may fail to induce meaningful genetic variation. Furthermore, although mutation induction itself is relatively rapid, the subsequent processes of selection, evaluation, and stabilization of promising mutants are time-consuming, often requiring multiple generations before a stable and commercially viable cultivar can be achieved.

Mutation breeding in the era of genomics

The future of mutation breeding in *Dianthus* and other crops is increasingly shaped by its integration with modern genomic and computational technologies. Advances in genomics, molecular biology, and data science are revolutionizing how induced mutations are detected, characterized, and utilized in breeding programs. Researchers are now combining traditional mutation techniques with molecular markers to efficiently track and validate genetic changes, while omics approaches - including genomics, transcriptomics, and metabolomics - provide deeper insights into gene function and expression patterns associated with desirable traits. In addition, artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning models are being employed to predict trait outcomes and identify promising mutants with greater accuracy. Together, these innovations significantly enhance the precision, speed, and efficiency of mutation breeding, reducing reliance on conventional trial-and-error methods and paving the way for a more targeted and data-driven approach to crop improvement.

Economic and ecological importance

Mutation breeding in *Dianthus* extends far beyond scientific advancement, playing a vital role in both economic growth and environmental sustainability. Economically, the development of new and improved carnation varieties significantly strengthens the floriculture industry, as *Dianthus* is a globally important ornamental crop with high market demand and export potential. The introduction of novel traits such as unique flower colors, improved yield, and enhanced floral quality helps meet the ever-changing consumer demand for novelty, thereby increasing the commercial appeal and profitability for growers. At the same time, mutation breeding contributes to ecological sustainability by enabling the development of varieties with improved stress tolerance, including resistance to abiotic stresses such as heat or salinity, which are increasingly important under changing climatic conditions. Such improvements can reduce dependence on chemical inputs like pesticides and fertilizers, promoting environmentally friendly cultivation practices. Thus, mutation breeding not only supports economic prosperity in the floriculture sector but also fosters sustainable and resilient ornamental crop production systems.

Conclusion: shaping the future of floral innovation

Beyond science, mutation breeding also reflects human creativity. Each new variety represents a blend of random genetic change and deliberate selection, guided by the breeder’s vision. In ornamental crops like *Dianthus*, breeding is as much about aesthetics as it is about agriculture. The ability to create new colors, shapes, and patterns turns plant breeding into a form of artistic expression. Mutation breeding in *Dianthus* has transformed a beautiful flower into an ever-evolving canvas of diversity. By harnessing genetic variation, breeders have created countless varieties that enrich our gardens, ceremonies, and daily lives. As science advances, mutation breeding will continue to evolve, integrating with modern genomic tools to deliver even more precise and efficient outcomes. In the end, every carnation we admire tells a story - not just of nature, but of innovation, curiosity, and the enduring human desire to create beauty.

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