

Tulips: Gems in the Garden

By Kathy Wolfe
April 1, 2016



A song of spring

Nothing sings spring better than viewing swaths of vibrant tulip color throughout our valley in both home landscapes and surrounding farm fields. The tulip is one of the world's most recognized and loved flowers. Tulips can symbolize imagination, dreaminess, or perfect love, often meanings which vary according to flower color.

The tulip was originally a wild flower growing in Central Asia. Turks first cultivated them as early as 1000 A.D. The name "tulip" springs from the Turkish word for turban. Originally used for medicinal purposes, they began being used as garden decoration upon their introduction to Western Europe and The Netherlands in the 17th century. As popularity grew, botanists began to hybridize the flower for larger and more varied colorations. "Tulipmania" was in full flower in the mid-1630s. Investors began to madly purchase tulips, pushing their prices to unprecedented highs. At one time the price of some single flowers exceeded the annual income of a skilled worker. As supplies became more available, prices drastically collapsed and many tulip investors instantly went bankrupt. Such is the power of this flower!

To understand more about this fascinating plant, an examination of its life cycle is helpful. Tulips store food created during the previous year in the tissue of their bulb. The growing cycle starts when it is planted in the fall and roots begin to grow into the soil. As the season moves into winter, the cold stimulates the bulb and by spring sprouting begins. At this point, rapid growth leads to blooming, at which time the bulb has used up its food reserves. To preserve the species, bulblets or little bulbs are formed. This occurs between the blooming and dying back cycles.



Roozengaarde workers hand-top tulips in the early morning. *Photo by Nancy Crowell / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners.*

Tulips are planted in our area in October and November. Always plant in well drained and airy soil, adding compost / coarse sand as needed. Cultivate to a depth of 10. "Plant bulbs 6 – 8" deep, measured from the base of the bulb, and plant approximately 4" apart. Fertilize and water, but don't overwater because wet soil promotes fungus and disease and can actually suffocate a bulb.

After bloom has peaked, cut off the flower to allow energy to move from feeding the seedpod to energizing the new bulb. Let the

plant die back normally. This will help the new bulblets grow bigger, which is especially important if you are trying to perennialize them, i.e., get them to come back year after year. Add special bulb fertilizer in the fall if you are encouraging the bulblets to form.

Tulips are classified as perennials but are often grown as annuals. They are perennials in their native growing region which has cold winters and hot, dry summers, unlike our Skagit Valley weather. Commercial growers carefully dig their bulbs six to eight weeks after removing the blooms. They then dry, clean, grade and apply special temperature and humidity controls to replicate native growing habitat. Home gardeners can dig their bulbs and store them for planting in the fall, leave them planted throughout the summer months or grow as annuals by planting new bulbs each year.



The Skagit Valley lights up with commercially grown tulips that grace the fields each spring. *Photo by Nancy Crowell / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners.*

Gardeners looking to extend the life of their bulbs can choose tulips that are marked for naturalizing or perennializing. Species/botanical types work best. Darwin hybrids, Fosteriana/Emperor tulips and some Triumph tulips perennialize well. On the subject of tulip varieties, the Royal Horticultural Society divides tulips into 15 types, mainly defined by their flower characteristics. Broadly speaking, they are described as single or double; cup-shaped, bowl-shaped or goblet-shaped; fringed, parrot or lily-flowered; long, slender-tepalled or star-shaped.

When choosing a type, consider the flowering times, suitability for beds or borders, rockeries or containers. Plant them in large groupings rather than rows for the most pleasing effect. Try blocks, sweeps or other clusters. A triangular shape with the point end starting closest to the viewer and fanning away can mimic a field of blooms. A bouquet shape using a circular grouping of bulbs gives the appearance of a spray of flowers.

Visualize using a variety of colors or different plant combinations to bring the most impact to your space. Visit flower displays, local botanical gardens and nurseries, home garden tours, books, catalogs, online sites and elsewhere to glean ideas fit for your location.

Pests can be a problem with tulips. Squirrels, rabbits, voles and deer are a few of the creatures that seem to love these plants as much as we do. One caution is to be sure to plant your bulbs deeply. Carefully clean up the area where bulbs are planted, including removing any papery jackets. Anything left behind provides a scent clue to squirrels and they will be digging them up in no time. Fortunately, squirrels have a short attention span, and you may be able to disguise your planting spots by covering them with rocks, buckets, chicken wire or whatever offers camouflage. The coverings can be removed as the season grows colder or the ground freezes.

Chipmunks and voles tunnel down and eat bulbs in the fall or early spring. Surrounding bulbs with sharp gravel or oyster shells or planting them in a wire cage can deter the rascals. Rabbits eat leaves and flowers in early spring. Use mesh covering around bulbs or spray with commercial deterrent, using brands as advised by your local master gardener, as soon as growth appears. Deer can be a challenge. Above ground mesh cages, fences, or spraying with a deterrent that deer find repugnant might encourage them to browse elsewhere.

With tulips ranging from the bold and adventurous to frilly and pretty, hot and cool colors and strong, elegant shapes, tulips are suited to formal gardens as well as naturalizing in wild areas. Use in massed groupings or combine with other flowers for endless possibilities to add interest and a pop of spring to your garden.

RESOURCES:

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- “Bulb Expert Tips.” Master Gardener at Washington Bulb Co., Inc., Roozengaarde. http://www.tulips.com/bulbs_expert_tips
- “A Care Guide to Growing Tulips.” *Weekend Gardener Monthly Web Magazine*. February 2016. <http://www.weekendgardener.net/perennial-flowers/growing.tulips.htm>
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- “Tulips with a Past.” Scott Kunst. *Horticulture Magazine*.
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