

THROUGH THE EYES OF A TULIP TOUR TREKKER

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Skagit Valley Tulip Festival Tour Memories from a Veteran 'Step-On-Guide'

Every April the Skagit Valley explodes into a riot of colors as over 1200 acres of daffodils, tulips, and iris burst into blooms of wild profusion. Since 2002 I have enjoyed sharing this annual treasure with hundreds of visitors. Paula Smith and I have been the chairwomen of the Skagit Master Gardeners' 'Step-On-Guides' committee. As guides, we step onto a professional touring bus or van escorting groups to the bulb fields while we give a commentary of Skagit Valley's agricultural industries. We cherish these encounters with myriad tourists, while teaching the stories behind the radiant blooms and verdant fields.

I'm always delighted by the questions like, "Can I take home the bulbs today?" We explain that once the blooms are spent, the foliage dies. Usually six-seven weeks later the mechanical digging commences. The bulbs are cleaned, sorted, and allowed to dry before they are packaged for sales starting in mid-September.

Volunteering as a 'Step-On-Guide' inspired me to write 'How Wide and How Deep,' a novella published in 2008 by Publish America. The following story is an excerpt from the book.

It is a raw and windy early spring day as I prepare for my journey into the Skagit Valley daffodil and tulip fields. I have volunteered to guide a tour bus of sixty jovial senior citizens to Roozengaarde and Tulip Town display gardens. Meeting the group at the Washington State University Discovery Garden on Memorial Highway, I have the opportunity to visit with the bus driver and accompanying tour director. They are from southern Oregon and have spent the night at a local motel. I talk briefly to their director asking for an estimate of time for our tour. This will determine how effectively I can deliver my narrative about our valley agriculture.

The group has just toured the Master Gardener's Discovery Garden on Memorial Highway. It is awash with the nodding heads of pink, blush, yellow and coral-colored parrot and hybrid tulips, and golden masses of daffodils, lush red and pink rhododendron blooms, and deep mauve azaleas. An eye-catching canopy of palest pink shades the ornamental cherry, magnolia, and crabapple trees, dazzling against the leaden-gray sky.

Once on the bus, the group has reclaimed their seating and is busy dissecting their tourist packets. As we leave the parking lot, our bus lurches onto the highway. Balancing myself against the row of seats, I grab the PA system microphone. It will be a three-hour trip, traipsing along country roads to view patchwork quilts of bursting flowers.

Turning onto the Beaver Marsh Road, there are "oohs" and "aahhs" from the group as they see the first glimpses of massed, gloriously-colored reds and yellowed tulip fields. We motor onto the graveled Roozengaarde driveway, and an attendant comes to direct our driver to an unloading zone. I mention that there are vendor tents pitched behind the gift shop and tulip related merchandise is available. The ladies squeal and grab their purses and umbrellas for our 50-minute stop.



Photos by Frank Varga / Skagit Valley Herald - Toni Caskey, a WSU Skagit County master gardener and Step-on tour guide, holds several brochures for Skagit Valley Tulip Festival visitors who participate this year in bus tours of the tulip fields.

The traffic in the parking lot is unbelievable! It is a sea of shuttle vans and tour buses with a hive of people buzzing along to the entrance gate. Everyone is laughing, joking, or smiling. Gray and silver heads bob here and there eagerly searching for photo ops before the mock, bright blue-green and white windmill. As if on cue clusters, drifts, and circular groupings of rainbow-colored tulips bend their cups toward the camera lens. Flashes of sunlight break through the gloomy layers of ash-colored clouds. We walk down the garden pathways.

There are over 200,000 tulip bulbs and the countless colors are staggering. Carefully planned and computer mapped, the formations are changed yearly. A huge 12-foot azalea bush drapes over the walkways and is laden with clumps of deep purples and mauve. Surrounding beds of pinks and yellows draw numerous stares and questions from my crowd.

Rounding a bed in the path, I direct their attention to Tulips Triumph, the best choice for early to mid-flowering bulbs. My favorite, Kees Neils, is a striking combination of outer salmon petals edged in yellow. Purpled Negritas and magnificent pale lavender and white centered Rem's Sensation glow in the morning light. We see a kaleidoscope; waves and waves of undulating formations of merging colors from scarlet, greens, yellows and lavenders. Dodging the streaming path of children, women, and men who stop abruptly for a photo op, we too are on sensory overload. Blooms vie for attention with their vibrant leaves and a toss of their saucy petals. Everywhere we look are blankets and blankets of color. Each grouping of beds is unique and distinct with mottled or striped foliage. The gardens are startling in their bright dresses of vivid coloring; an enchanting fairyland of riotous floribunda.

Finally my sightseers are ready to shop the vendor circle. After shopping, I note we are running out of time, and I must herd them back to our bus. Several women are tired and I remind them that beverages and foods are available at our next stop, Tulip Town.

As we answer any final questions, the happy visitors gather their many purchases. Bags of flowers, candles, Tulip Festival shirts and other treasures will bring the festival back to homes around the world. Then it's time for the 'Step-On-Guides' to prepare for the next group of delightful guests.

More Information:

Your tour group can enjoy the services of the Skagit Master Gardeners' 'Step-On-Guides' by contacting Paula Smith at 360-428-5782 or mgtuliptours@aol.com. Donations for these volunteer guide services directly support Skagit Master Gardeners' many educational programs.

For a pot full of blooms:

For next fall, plant your own tulip/daffodil/hyacinth festival with Toni Caskey's plan for a multi-layered pot full of colorful blooms (from the Skagit Count Extension Master Gardeners Tulip Tours website: <http://skagit.wsu.edu/mg/tuliptours.htm>)

- Layer several bulb types.
- Get a round planter 15 to 20 inches in diameter.
- Put in a shallow layer of gravel or broken terra cotta pot pieces.
- Layer potting soil and scratch in some bone meal.
- Plant 15 to 25 tulip bulbs.
- Add a layer of soil and bone meal.
- Plant 6 Dutch Master Daffodils.
- Add another layer of soil and bone meal.
- Plant 3 or 4 hyacinths.
- Cover with soil.
- Keep container in garage for the winter.
- When shoots come up in January, begin to water weekly.
- After the last frost, or in early March, move planter outside into the full sun.