

# Tulip Festival Step-On Tours

By Jason Miller

April 3, 2009



## **Step-on tours from WSU Master Gardeners educate, delight Tulip Festival visitors.**

If you or out-of-town guests plan to take in the Tulip Festival by hopping on a tour bus, you might want to ask the tour company to invite an extra passenger or two.

The WSU Master Gardeners offer a step-on guide service that accompanies tour groups, taking them on lively and informative tours as their buses wend their way through the tapestry of bulbs for which the Tulip Festival is famous: the largest growing area for tulip bulbs outside of Holland.

“The tour companies engage our service to provide local information and color for the people on board,” said Paula Smith, a WSU Master Gardener, who, along with fellow Master Gardener Toni Caskey, manages the service and works as a tour guide. “We have a very good time doing this, because we love to share this area with people.”

The process begins when organized tour groups send an e-mail to Smith at [MGTULIPTOURS@aol.com](mailto:MGTULIPTOURS@aol.com). Smith schedules Master Gardener volunteer guides and navigators (necessary for some of the larger buses), who start every tour by meeting at the WSU Discovery Garden. There, guests are treated to a docent-led tour, complete with coffee and cookies. The tour continues with a leisurely drive out to Roozengaarde and Tulip Town—where everyone can jump out and explore—with the guide imparting information along the way.

All passengers are given an information packet, too, which includes a copy of the MacGregor Guide, tips on growing tulips at home, a brochure from Skagitonians to Preserve Farmland, a map, and a Discovery Garden brochure.

The presentations are scripted to a point, but any subject is up for grabs when out-of-town visitors are in the audience. “We talk about the history of the tulip, the tulip industry here in the Skagit River valley, agricultural facts, and a lot of other topics,” said Smith.

Smith and the other guides are dynamos, talking about seed history, birds and wildlife, and the uniqueness of the Skagit River (it’s the third largest river in the western North America, second only to the Frasier and the Columbia). As Master Gardeners, they are trained and certified volunteers, ready to pass on research-based information about home gardening, landscaping, insect and disease management, pesticide safety, and other horticultural issues.

The questions come nonstop, rapid-fire. How many acres of tulips? How many of daffodils? Why the 5-year rotation for planting? How tall is Mount Baker? Is that a bald eagle? Why are there ditches running through the fields?

Smith and her colleagues are prepared for these and a whole slew of other topics. They wax eloquent on the wisdom of healthful food, sustainable agriculture, buying local. They weigh in on “agritainment” and vertical integration of food crops. They explain why the Sakumas process their own produce.

The step-on guide program is a fundraiser for the Skagit County Master Gardener Foundation—tour companies pay between \$55 and \$80 per tour, depending on the size of their groups—but more importantly, the program is viewed as an educational outreach opportunity. “We had almost 1,400 visitors during the Tulip Festival last spring,” said Smith. “And we donate our tips to the Master Gardener program, too.”

### **Schedule a step-on tour**

The step-on tour program does not provide its own transportation. It is designed to provide knowledgeable guides for existing tour buses of all sizes. To book a guide and navigator (if necessary), tour companies should contact Paula Smith via e-mail at [MGTULIPTOURS@aol.com](mailto:MGTULIPTOURS@aol.com). If you want to enjoy this service, hook up with a tour company that is including a Master Gardener step-on tour in its itinerary.



**Step-on tours include a 1-hour stop at Roozengaarde (above) and Tulip Town, where passengers can hop off the bus and explore the beautiful bulb displays.** Photo by Jason Miller.

Want to learn more about the Discovery Garden without hopping a bus? Docents are on hand at the Discovery Garden for drop-in visitors on Saturday and Sunday from 10 a.m. till 2 p.m. during the Tulip Festival. There also are many Master Gardeners at the garden every Tuesday. The garden is located at 16650 State Route 536, in Mount Vernon.