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BY SCOTT KUNST

Tulips

WITH A PAST

These antique cultivars and species offer durability, charm, and grace

TULIPS have a long and fabled history in gardens. Gathered from the wild by sultans of the Ottoman Empire, they were painted in exquisite detail by peers of Rembrandt, nurtured in the sparse gardens of the American colonies, and lavished in carpet beds for Queen Victoria. Today, you can reprise their whole glorious history by planting antique tulips, living relics that are the same varieties cherished by gardeners of the past four centuries. Since many of these tulips are in danger of extinction, by growing them you will also be helping to save an irreplaceable part of our horticultural inheritance.

Even gardeners who have little interest in the past will find much to recommend antique tulips. They offer a vast range of sizes, shapes, colors, even fragrance. And in my experience they usually perform better in the garden than modern tulips. This makes sense, since most were bred for garden use, unlike most modern tulips, which have been bred specifically for greenhouse and cut-flower production.

ORIGINS

Tulip history begins in the region east of the Mediterranean into central Asia. About 80 species grow wild there, often on arid mountain slopes—something to keep in mind when trying to keep tulips happy in your garden. They appeared in Persian poetry as early as the 1200s, and rose to special prominence in the Ottoman Empire after 1500 when they were collected from the wild

by the hundreds of thousands and depicted frequently in decorative arts. Their popularity peaked there in the early 1700s, when distinctive, stiletto-petaled tulips were all the rage. *Tulipa acuminata* may be one last survivor from this era.

In the mid-1500s, tulips burst onto the scene in Renaissance Europe, where their colorful, exotic blossoms caused an immediate sensation. Before long, scores were depicted in lavish florilegia such as Parkinson's *Paradisi in Sole Paradisus Terrestris* (1629). Some were wild species, and though some are marketed as heirlooms today, the truth is that few species tulips ever made it out of botanical gardens or the collections of specialists until the 20th century. One exception is the willowy Florentine tulip, *T. sylvestris*, with nodding buds, yellow almond-shaped flowers, and a scent of violets. It dates to 1597 or possibly even the 1200s in Italian gardens. Another is the original white-and-red *T. clusiana* or lady tulip (1607), which can still be obtained if you're careful. Most dealers, unfortunately, substitute yellow-and-red forms or hybrid cousins. *Tulipa clusiana* is one tulip that will perennialize in warm-winter areas, such as Texas and California.

THE EARLY EUROPEAN TULIPS

A much better example of the earliest tulips in European gardens is 'Lac van Rijn' (1620). With its high crown of pointed, deep purple-red petals edged with ivory, 'Lac van Rijn' clearly shows its Turkish



Tulipa acuminata, 1720



Facts & Figures

Antique Tulips

TYPE OF PLANT: bulbous perennial
FAMILY: Liliaceae (lily family) **HARDINESS:** USDA Zones 3–8; Sunset Zones 1–24, 28–45 **EXPOSURE:** full sun **SOIL:** reasonably fertile, very well drained **PLANTING DEPTH:** 6–8 in. for most varieties **PLANTING TIME:** October–November optimal **WATER NEEDS:** moderate fall through spring; should be kept as dry as possible in summer **FEEDING:** after planting, scratch slow-release fertilizer into the soil above; repeat every fall thereafter **PROPAGATION:** separate offsets from main bulb after foliage has died down

Getting Tulips to Last

For a start, you need to be in USDA Zone 7 or colder. Next, keep them dry in summer (as in their native homes). Try planting a few where you never water—or near a thirsty shrub or tree—and see how well they return.

Beyond that, basics include well-drained soil, good sun, regular fertilizing, and letting the foliage ripen to yellow. Some authorities recommend deep planting (to 12 inches), especially in the South, but six to eight inches is usually deep enough.

Another age-old method involves digging them up every summer, storing them in a cool, dry spot, and replanting them in the fall. This also allows you to increase your stock by separating the offset bulbs.

Some varieties simply last better, such as the single earlies, species, single lates, and lily-flowered. In general, old varieties perennialize better because they were bred for gardens rather than as commercial pot flowers or for the cut-flower trade, as most modern tulips have been.—S.K.



'Orange Favourite', 1930



'Generaal de Wet', 1904



'Couleur Cardinal', 1845

ancestry. It commanded fabulous prices during the 1630s, when the speculative frenzy known as Tulipomania swept the Netherlands. The most prized tulips then were “broken” tulips, which were flamed and feathered with contrasting colors by a benign virus, a phenomenon that was not understood till the 1920s. Though these exquisitely patterned tulips reigned supreme well into the 1800s and thousands were introduced, bulb sellers today offer just one lone survivor: ‘Zomerschoon’ (1620). The great Edwardian gardener E. A. Bowles called it his “best beloved of all tulips,” and I’d have to agree. Its creamy white petals are flamed with a damasklike pattern of pink and rose, like raspberries swirled into melting ice cream. One look and you’ll never again be satisfied with those crude 20th-century imitations known as Rembrandt tulips. Paintings of both ‘Lac van Rijn’ and ‘Zomerschoon’ survive in a Dutch flower book from the days of Tulipomania, and can be viewed online at www.bib.wau.nl/tulips. Though you’ll no longer have to offer a yoke of oxen for them, neither bulb is cheap. But what else can you own today from the 1600s?

Another group of distinctive tulips that were exceedingly popular from the 1600s through the 1800s—and today have almost disappeared—are the fairylike Duc van Thols. Five to seven inches tall and very early blooming, these perfect mini-tulips were planted in parterres, at the front of borders, and forced for Christmas. The first, called simply ‘Duc van Thol Red and Yellow’, appeared in 1595. Paired with dark purple hyacinths, its tiny flames are stunning. Over the next 325 years almost 20 other colors were introduced. One of my favorites is ‘Duc van Thol Rose’ (1700), a dainty white feathered at the edges with pink.

THE 18TH CENTURY

Through the 1700s, tulips continued to be garden superstars. Though most cultivars from that era have become extinct, a diverse group known as neo-tulips may date that far back. These were discovered in scattered locations in Italy, France, and Switzerland in the late 1800s and at first identified as species. Later scholars, though,

have noted that the wild populations are all in the vicinity of old settlements, and many now consider them very old garden escapes. *Tulipa marjollettii*, whose waiflike, pale lemon-to-cream petals are touched at the edges with rose, is the most commonly available, but others include *T. grengiolensis*, *T. mauritania*, and *T. platystigma*.

One confirmed survivor from the 1700s is ‘Keizerskroon’ (“Emperor’s Crown”), a bright, dependable, Single Early tulip with red flowers broadly edged with yellow. It dates to 1750 and blooms by the hundreds every spring at Mount Vernon. Beware, though: counterfeit varieties are widely substituted for it today, a problem with many antique cultivars.

EMINENT VICTORIANS

In the Victorian era, short, bright Single Earlys became the most fashionable tulips, massed in the cookie-cutter beds that spangled every stylish lawn. The oldest Victorian tulip is the great ‘Couleur Cardinal’, a Single Early from 1845 with dark stems and red flowers deepened by a plum blush. Even better, I’d say, is ‘Prince of Austria’, an orange-red Single Early from 1860 that returns more strongly than any tulip I’ve ever grown in my USDA Zone 5b, sandy-loam, Michigan garden—and it’s often considered the most fragrant tulip ever. Two other richly fragrant antiques are ‘Generaal de Wet’ (1904) and ‘Prinses Irene’ (1949).

Several fine Double Early tulips also survive from the days of bedding out, but they have fallen so far out of fashion that today only the most daring gardeners seem willing to try them. Pink-and-white ‘Peach Blossom’ from 1890, though, is an easy one to start with—it looks like a frilly antique valentine. Or take a deep breath and plant two of my favorites: deep, purple-rose-red ‘Electra’ (1905) and complex, sunset-hued ‘Willem van Oranje’ (1933).

EDWARDIAN RICHES

At the turn of the 20th century, as perennial borders and cottage-garden effects came into vogue, gardeners looked for taller, later-

Antique tulips at a glance

Name	Color
<i>T. acuminata</i>	cream & red
'Black Parrot'	dark purple
'Bleu Aimable'	lavender
'Clara Butt'	pink
<i>T. clusiana</i>	rose & white
'Couleur Cardinal'	deep red
'Demeter'	rosy purple
'Dillenburg'	orange & rose
Duc van Thols	various
'Electra'	dark rose
'Elizabeth Arden'	coral pink
'Fantasy'	pink blend
'Generaal de Wet'	amber-orange
'Golden Harvest'	soft yellow
'Greuze'	dark purple
'Invasion'	ruddy & cream
'Keizerskroon'	red & yellow
'Lac van Rijn'	red-purple & ivory
<i>T. marjollettii</i>	pale yellow & rose
'Orange Favourite'	orange, rose & green
'Peach Blossom'	pink & white
'Philippe de Comines'	dark purple
'Prince of Austria'	orange red
'Princess Elizabeth'	pink
'Prinses Irene'	orange & purple
'Red Emperor'	red
<i>T. sylvestris</i>	yellow
'West Point'	yellow
'Willem van Oranje'	copper peach
'Zomerschoon'	cream & rose

'Lac van Rijn', 1620

Type	Bloom Time	Height	Year
species	L	20 in.	1720
Parrot	L	20 in.	1937
Darwin	L	24 in.	1916
Darwin	L	22 in.	1889
species	M	10–14 in.	1607
Single Early	EM	12 in.	1845
Triumph	M	24 in.	1932
Dutch Breeder	L	26 in.	1916
Duc	VE	5–7 in.	1595–1921
Double Early	E	12 in.	1905
Darwin Hybrid	M	22 in.	1942
Parrot	L	21 in.	1910
Single Early	E	14 in.	1904
Cottage	L	26 in.	1928
Darwin	L	23 in.	1891
Triumph	M	16 in.	1944
Single Early	E	13 in.	1750
Single Early	EM	14 in.	1620
species	L	14 in.	1894
Parrot	L	20 in.	1930
Double Early	E	12 in.	1890
Darwin	L	24 in.	1891
Single Early	E	16 in.	1860
Darwin	L	26 in.	1898
Triumph	M	14 in.	1949
Fosteriana	VE	16 in.	1931
species	EM	10–12 in.	1597
Lily-Flowered	L	20 in.	1943
Double Early	E	11 in.	1933
Broken	L	16 in.	1620

blooming, pastel tulips to weave into their new designs. Unfortunately, the Dutch bulb fields at the time held little but the recently popular Single Earlys—all short, bright, and early—so breeders had to track down old-fashioned, all-but-forgotten tulips from the farm gardens of Flanders and England. From these relics they developed the exciting new tulips of the early 1900s. Most popular of all was the very first of the Darwin tulips, ‘Clara Butt’, a lovely shell pink introduced in 1889. “Commercially extinct” today in the Netherlands, the

center of world tulip production, it’s grown by just one U.S. bulb farmer. ‘Clara’ consorts happily with ‘Philippe de Comines’, of 1891, whose deep, dark flowers look like polished mahogany.

Another popular group, filling page after page in early-1900s catalogs, were the Dutch Breeders. These were Single Late tulips famed for their “art shades”—unusual colors and combinations such as maroon and bronze or fawn with olive. Today, all have disappeared from commerce except for one lone survivor, peach-and-rose ‘Dillenburgh’ (1916), a favorite of well-known British gardener Christopher Lloyd. Other lovely early-20th-century tulips that are still enriching gardens today include dark maroon-purple ‘Greuze’ (1891); silvery pink ‘Princess Elizabeth’ (1898); lavender ‘Bleu Aimable’ (1916), which seems to last forever in bloom; and soft, luminous yellow ‘Golden Harvest’ (1928). One appealing quality of these early-20th-century tulips is that their flowers are somewhat smaller than most modern tulips, which makes them easier to integrate into perennial borders. Even when they are brightly colored, they seem to whisper seductively rather than shout.

THE MID-20TH CENTURY

The 20th century brought us many more wonderful tulips than we can consider here. Pink-brushed-with-green ‘Fantasy’ (1910), the first parrot tulip with a strong stem, led to a parrot renaissance. Brilliant ‘Orange Favourite’ (1930) and glossy ‘Black Parrot’ (1937) are among the century’s best. Lily-flowered tulips came into vogue in the 1940s, their narrow, reflexing petals recalling early Turkish tulips. To me, elegant yellow ‘West Point’ (1943) is still the finest.

Our current vogue for species tulips can be traced to the fashion for rock gardens early in the century, and especially to the introduction of ‘Red Emperor’ in 1931. Though billions of bulbs of this big, red, strongly perennializing tulip have been sold since then, they all started from a single bulb collected from the wild in Turkey. Crossed with Darwin tulips, ‘Red Emperor’ gave rise to the large-flowered Darwin hybrids, which became perhaps the most important tulips of the 20th century. One of the oldest survivors today is 1942’s flamingo-pink ‘Elizabeth Arden’. Rivaling the Darwin Hybrids are the mid-season Triumphs. Two of the best of the older ones are rosy purple ‘Demeter’ (1932), revered for its long life in the garden, and a ruddy, sandstone-and-cream tulip from 1944 called ‘Invasion’.

Tulip history doesn’t end there, of course, but we are going to. Certainly there are enough antiques here to start your own personal tulip museum or plant a tiny Noah’s ark of endangered cultivars. Enrich your garden, touch the past, and sample a few. Their survival depends on gardeners like you. **H**

For sources of tulips featured in this article, turn to page 89.

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