



A Touch of Tulipmania

by Carol Seminara, HCMG

In addition to being one of Spring's most beloved and decorative harbingers, tulips were once a form of currency and the cause of history's first financial panic.

Although we think of them as "Dutch tulips," the tulipa is a genus of about 150 species of bulbous flowering plants in the Liliaceae family. Originally a wild flower growing in Central Asia, tulips were cultivated as early as 1000 AD by the Turks and remain the national flower of Turkey. Indeed the name tulip comes from the Persian word "tulbend," which mean turban and both describes the blooms appearance and references the Turkish tradition of wearing tulips in one's headgear. Tulips were introduced to the Netherlands in the 16th century by botanist Charles de l'Ecluse (a.k.a. Carolus Clusius), who as honorary professor of botany at the University of Leiden established a botanical garden featuring his personal collection of tulip bulbs in 1573. The first Netherlands tulips bloomed the following spring.

Prized both for their beauty and potential medicinal use, tulip bulbs were considered a precious rarity. Through the 1600s prices for bulbs soared as botanists worked to hybridize the flower into rarer colors and more decorative blooms. As these hybrids became increasingly spectacular with extravagant frilly petals and dramatic flames of color, they were quickly adopted by the wealthy as a status symbol. Tulip bulbs sold for ridiculously high prices, sometime for more than the cost of a house in Amsterdam. The period from late 1636 to early 1637 is classified "tulipmania," during which time a single tulip bulb sold for the equivalent of \$2,250 plus a horse and carriage. Today a similar "Rembrandt" tulip bulb sells for less than one dollar. Despite the subsequent "tulip crash" of 1637, tulips remain a blooming business in Holland and each year about 7 million bulbs are exported, with the U.S. being the biggest importer of Dutch bulbs.

Historically tulips were considered completely ill-suited to Texas gardens. In fact, a recent inquiry re: naturalized bulbs on plantanswers.com informed me "tulips belong in Holland where they are produced." Nonetheless, last February I attended a lecture by Danny Fowler of Texas Tulips, and I fell in love. In the language of flowers, tulips mean perfect love and Danny's tulips were perfect: graceful, elegant, vibrant and, he assured, growable in the Hill Country. In fact, Texas Tulips is based in Austin. The bulbs are imported directly from Holland but only those varieties proven best suited to our climate.

Spring-blooming bulbs need to be planted from December through mid-February but always before the first hard frost. Look for well-formed, firm bulbs. Tulip bulbs require pre-chilling for 45 to 60 days prior to planting. If your bulbs don't arrive pre-chilled (Danny's did) this can be accomplished in the vegetable bin of your refrigerator with a couple of caveats: keep the bulbs dry and well ventilated to avoid mold or rot by wrapping in paper towels and storing in a paper bag, and avoid exposing the bulbs to any ripening fruit. Tulips bulbs are especially sensitive to ethylene gas produced by apples, bananas, etc.

Plant tulip bulbs close together but not touching, about 3 to 4 inches deep (minimally at least two times the height of the bulb) in partial-shade to partial-sun in a site protected from hot afternoon sun. Underneath a deciduous tree is an ideal spot. Plant bulbs pointy side up in well-drained soil. Cover and lightly firm soil. A couple of inches of mulch is optional but recommended if a hard freeze is predicted. Bulbs should be watered thoroughly after planting and then 2 to 3 times a week.

Some factors to consider when selecting which tulips to plant include type of bloom, flower color and size, when it blooms and plant height (usually classified as dwarf, medium or tall). Bulbs should be planted in groups to be most effective; a single tulip lacks impact in your landscape and just looks lonely.

Here's a short list of recommended types and varieties of tulips for Texas gardens gleaned from an article by Dr. Bill Welch:

- Darwin Tulips are classic, all-purpose tulips known for their huge, brilliantly colored flowers. Long-stemmed (18-24 inches), these are considered the best type for cut flowers and will come back year after year. (BTW, do NOT cut the leaves off after the blooms are spent. This prevents the bulb from properly developing for next year's flowering.) Peak bloom period is late March to early April.
- Cottage Tulips have large, egg-shaped flowers, tall stems and bloom in late spring (through May). Good for cutting.
- Parrot Tulips have fringed petals with splashes of green that look like feathers. Tall (16-20 inches) and somewhat weak stemmed, these can be damaged by wind and rain.
- Peony Tulips (also called Double Tulips) are medium height (10-12 inches) with large, double petalled, long-lasting, fragrant blooms. Peak bloom time is late spring.
- Lily-flowered Tulips have long, pointed petals on slender stems (14-20 inches).

My personal treasure trove (about \$60 worth) of tulip bulbs is ensconced around the base of one of my pecan trees. I worry about the lack of rain and vagaries of temperature, I keep a wary eye out for marauding squirrels and, like anyone smitten, I watch and wait.