

Can a simple flower cause intelligent adults to lose all reason? If you've ever been to an end-of-season plant clearance at a local garden centre you may think so. A more extreme example is tulipmania in The Netherlands in the 17th century. People lost fortunes in the pursuit of a single plant when the desire to own something rare and beautiful caused good judgment to flee.

Originally native to Central Asia and Turkey, tulips were introduced into Western Europe about the middle of the sixteenth century. In fact, the name tulip comes from a Turkish word, meaning a turban. By the early 1600's, the tulip became a status symbol of the wealthy who could afford to buy plants direct from Constantinople. At one point, the whole Dutch economy centred on tulips, often at the expense of more traditional forms of commerce.

The tulip frenzy took on a life of its own. In 1623, a single bulb of a rare variety could cost as much as 1,000 Dutch florins, yet the average annual income was only 150 florins. A brightly streaked bloom (T. Semper Augustus) set a record price of 6,000 florins at the height of tulipmania. In 1637 the bubble burst and the public was no longer willing, or could not afford, to pay the inflated prices. Many Dutch businessmen were left in financial ruins. The resulting economic crash was so profound it has been compared to the 1929 stock market crash.

Today, tulips are again a major force in the Dutch economy, but as a key horticultural export. Although the tulip is synonymous with The Netherlands, the Dutch do not rely solely on one crop. They are the leading bulb hybridizers and growers in the world.

When the Dutch wanted to thank Canada for the hospitality extended to Princess Juliana and her daughters during World War II, they gifted 100,000 tulips to Ottawa. This was the start of the Canadian Tulip Festival. Now, along with the yearly gift of 10,000 bulbs from The Netherlands, the National Capital Commission plants close to 1 million bulbs each fall, for next year's Festival.

But it's not just the NCC, who are busy planting tulips this time of year. Homeowners and landscapers are also planning for a spring display of colour. Planting tulip bulbs is almost foolproof; even if planted upside down, the shoots will naturally reach for the light and warmth of the spring sun.

Planning your tulip bed

Here are some tips to keep in mind when planning to add tulips to your garden.

Since they bloom so early in the season, plant them towards the back of a flowerbed or border. They will be easily visible since the perennials in the foreground have not put on much spring growth yet. But once the tulips are finished blooming, those perennials will be starting to put on vigorous growth and will hide the fading tulip foliage.

It is important to mark where you have planted your tulips. They are dormant for most of the growing season, so you may think you have an empty spot in your garden and make the mistake of slicing through the bulbs with a planting spade in an attempt to plant something there.

Try to arrange groups of tulips for a bigger colour splash. I usually plant a grouping of 10 or 12 bulbs since that is often the package size. Avoid planting tulips in a row or just a single bulb here and there. This style of planting doesn't have the impact of a larger grouping.

There are tulips that bloom early, mid and late season. For a continuous display, include tulips from all three bloom periods.

Tulips also come in varying heights and colours. Try complementary colours or a monochromatic colour scheme to add interest to the landscape. Different heights of tulip groupings could be staged together for a multi-level display.

When purchasing bulbs, make sure they are firm and free of any mould or disease. The size of bulbs will vary with the variety of tulip. However, read the label to be sure they are bloom size bulbs and not young bulblets that won't bloom for a couple of years.

Tulips should be planted – with the pointy side up – about 15-20 cm deep, although I know one garden guru who recommends planting at least 30-40 cm deep to foil the squirrels. Tulip bulbs are a delicacy to squirrels, so plant them deep or in bulb cages or place a piece of wire mesh over them to deter the squirrels from digging. Tulips can be planted in the fall until the ground freezes.

Tulip maintenance

Tulips don't require a lot of maintenance. Everything the plant needs for next year's bloom is already in the bulb when you plant it. Add some slow-release bulb fertilizer at the time of planting to feed the bulb for the following year's bloom.

When the tulips have finished blooming, the foliage should be left to die back naturally. The tulip leaves are making food and storing energy back into the bulb for next year's flowers. Adding a top dressing or sprinkling some bulb food around the plants after blooming will help to feed the bulb for next year. Once the foliage has died back, the bulb will go dormant until next spring.

Hopefully, I've infected you with a bit of tulipmania and now you feel the urge to plant some bulbs this fall. Just don't get carried away!