

Tulipa species

TULIP is a bulbous plant. Native from eastern to central Asia and to North Africa, it has flowers of varying colour.

It is also known as *Culip*, *Gartentulpe* (German), *Lale çiç* (Turkish), *Lancettoni* (Italian), *Tulipano* (Italian), *Tulipe* (French), *Tulipe des fleuristes* (French), *Tulp* (Dutch), and *Tulpe* (German); and in flower language it is said to be a symbol of ardent love (red), beautiful eyes (variegated), consuming love, ‘declaration of love’ (red), eloquence, enchantment (variegated), eternal separation, extravagance, fame, hopeless love (yellow), ‘I love you’ (red), love, oratory, Spring, and ‘your eyes are beautiful’ (variegated).

Warning – tulip is poisonous especially the bulb. It can cause increased salivation, nausea, sweating, respiratory difficulties, palpitation, vomiting and weakness. Prolonged handling of the bulb, stem and flowers can cause dermatitis (known to some florists as ‘tulip fingers’). It is poisonous for animals.

Tulip’s bulb is similar in appearance to that of onion (*Allium cepa*).

There are over 100 species of these bulbs. Most are native from eastern to central Asia and to North Africa but about a dozen can be found in Europe (including a rare one in Britain).

Today’s cultivated species followed the bulbs (possibly a Middle Eastern species, garden tulip, *Tulipa gesneriana*) introduced to European gardens from Turkey in 1544 by a Flemish diplomat who served as an Ambassador to the Sultan of Turkey, Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq. Records indicate that De Busbecq had so admired the exotic-looking tulips in Turkish gardens that he acquired a few bulbs (it is said ‘at a great price’) and sent them to Vienna. It should be said though that some authorities have suggested that tulip bulbs only reached northern Europe in 1562, by accident, when they were found by an importer in Antwerp caught up inside a bale of cloth. He is said to have eaten some of them, planted the rest and been surprised by the flowers which emerged the following year. {The Turks had strict laws covering the cultivation and sale of tulips and the flower held a similar place in their affections then to that it now holds in the Netherlands today.} Not long afterwards the Swiss naturalist and physician, Conrad Gasner (1516-1565) also obtained some bulbs, and separately the French botanist Charles de Lécluse (1525-1609) when in Vienna in 1572 received bulbs from Constantinople which he took to Leiden in 1593 when he took up a post of professor of botany. Not only were the latter destined to form the basis of a large collection but their popularity was also such that he charged high prices for the bulbs – sufficiently high in fact to attract the notice of thieves who then stole bulbs from his walled garden.

The tulip is said to have arrived in Britain in about 1577 or the early 1580s, and authorities note that reliable reports indicate its growth in France in 1598 and in Switzerland in 1599.

Initially the flowers had plain colours and interest in them was limited but in time their appearance became flamed, striped or feathered (known as ‘broken’). It was only later in 1919 that the reason for this was suspected – and subsequently confirmed. The striking variations on the plain colours were due to infection from an aphid-transmitted virus.

Returning to the 17th Century, for reasons as yet unidentified the tulip began to be fashionable in France between 1610 and 1620 and prices for the bulbs began to soar. This spread elsewhere in Europe. Records suggest that England caught the craze from about 1620.

Here tulips took over from carnations (*Dianthus caryophyllus*) and pinks (*Dianthus plumarius*) as the fashionable flower (striped varieties receiving particular attention) only to be supplanted themselves towards the end of that Century some authorities note by auriculas (*Primula auricula*).

By 1634 however the Netherlands led the spiralling ‘tulip mania’ – which spread in lesser degrees to surrounding countries. It was fuelled not least by a tulip futures market for speculation on bulbs yet to be reared and exotic varieties that were particularly sought after. At that time the striped tulips were favoured but single bulbs of any kind sold for hundreds of pounds with the prices ever-increasing. It is understood that one of the rare ‘Semper Augustus’ was sold for 13,000 guilders (about £1,500 at that time). Many peasants grew rich overnight, many buyers lost the roofs over their heads – and the mania became paper speculation. In Bruges ‘Tulip Notes’ (promissory notes for the supply of a stated number of bulbs of a particular kind, bearing in mind that these would by then have become in short supply) were exchanged at the house of the Van der Beurse family. (This family name was to form the root of the French word for ‘Stock Exchange’ ie. *bourse*.) Then the bubble burst. The Dutch Government decreed in April 1637 that the Tulip Notes must be honoured – and broken men and suicides followed this announcement. Although however the unreal price of the bulbs was swept away they could still be an investment (on a more moderate scale) two hundred years later when between 1820-1850 a desirable ‘broken’ tulip bulb could fetch as much as from £100-150 (still large amounts if translated into today’s values).

But the tulip was not only an investment or means of downfall in western Europe (according to individual experience). Its inflated value invested it with a status symbol readily recognized among the wealthy in other western European countries besides the Netherlands. For many historians this factor gave a significant boost to the doomed craze. On the European mainland only the wealthy could afford to actually grow tulips in their gardens. When Louis XIV (1638-1715) was on the French throne the ladies of his Court decorated their plunging necklines with the flowers. The tulip’s shape was also to inspire artists and craftsmen and the flower can be seen portrayed in many famous paintings. Its influence is also apparent in the shape or decoration of furniture and other artefacts of the period. As the mania progressed there were those such as the clergy who foretold the speculators’ downfall and others who ridiculed those who promoted the excesses. Not least among the latter was the Flemish artist, Jan Brueghel II (1601--1678) grandson of Pieter Brueghel (the Elder), who painted in the family style and depicted what were allegedly tulip brokers in session on a veranda overlooking parkland swarming with activity – only all the people are monkeys.

What is ironic is that history repeated itself fifty to one hundred years later back in Turkey from whence the bulbs had originally arrived in western Europe. Ahmet III (1673-1736) whose reign as Turkey’s Sultan began in 1703, saw a similar mania to that experienced in the Netherlands especially in the previous century. This seems so pointless when for centuries earlier the tulip had provided the inspiration for such beauty in design and decoration still evident on a multitude of artefacts such as household vessels, architecture and mosaics.

The tulip has not been as successful as say the rose in inspiring writers to heights of literary ecstasy or in moving them to weave the flower into their plots or themes. Tulips are referred to occasionally however. Apart from the English poets, Humbert Wolfe (1885-1940) and Rupert Brooke (1887-1915) and the English poet and novelist, Vita Sackville-West (1892-1962) who also established the famous garden at Sissinghurst in Kent, who are witnesses to this, there is also the American poet, Amy Lowell (1874-1925) who wrote.

Guarded within the old red wall's embrace,
Marshalled like soldiers in gay company,
The tulips stand arrayed. Here infantry
Wheels out into the sunlight.

During the 17th and 18th Centuries tulip bulbs were eaten both as a sweetmeat and an aphrodisiac. In the latter capacity they were compared with the roots of sea-holly (*Eryngium maritimum*) that itself had attracted some notoriety for its own seductive qualities.

It was mentioned earlier that Britain was touched by the tulip mania in about 1620. Here however there is understood to have been a striking difference in those who took part – they were not wealthy and commercial interest was absent. Apparently the English seemed to concentrate their attention on growing the bulb – and producing a perfectly round bulb at that – and this led to the formation of the National Tulip Society, a body whose activities persisted until the 1930s.

The tulip does not escape Christian traditions as for some it is recognized as the emblem of Christ and a symbol of the chalice.

Tulip festivals are still held today in several countries including some towns in the United States and Canada. But it is probably not unexpected that those of greatest note still take place in the Netherlands.

Purple tulip is the birthday flower for 21st March (and given on that day signifies undying love).

Yellow tulip is the birthday flower for 17th May (and given on that day signifies hopeless love – although this becomes positive if the flower is presented upside down).

Red tulip is the birthday flower for 7th June.

Variegated tulip is the birthday flower for 8th June.