

Janet B. Carson
Extension Horticulture Specialist
Arkansas Democrat-Gazette
Tulips – Dec 2015

While many gardeners are busy with the hustle and bustle of the holiday season, if you can carve out a few moments to garden, this is a great time to plant spring flowering bulbs. Bulbs also make great gifts and can be planted outside through the middle of January. Spring blooming bulbs include daffodils, hyacinths and crocus, but the king of all the bulbs is the tulip. This showy blooming bulb is usually treated as an annual bulb in Arkansas and replanted each fall through early winter.

Tulips, like wooden shoes and windmills, are associated worldwide with the Netherlands. And while wooden shoes and windmills help with the tourist trade, tulips are still an important Dutch commodity, but they didn't get their start there. The tulip is actually a native of central Asia in mountain ranges near Islamabad. From there, tulips spread to China and Mongolia. The Turkish Empire spread this flower through Persia and Asia from as early as 1,000 A.D. A Viennese ambassador to Turkey, Augerius Busbequius, was the first European on record to introduce tulips to Europe. He found them growing in Turkish gardens and sent seed home. Flowers caused such a stir in Vienna that seeds and bulbs were soon sent to all parts of Europe. Botanist Carolus Clusius of Leyden took it a step further and in the late sixteenth century his cultivation of tulips in the botanic garden was the beginning of the Dutch tulip bulb industry. Now, more than 400 years later, billions of tulips are being cultivated. The 'garden tulip' is the result of hybridization in which the species *Tulipa gesneriana* played an important role. Today there are more than 3,000 cultivated varieties registered, with more varieties being added each year to replace older varieties. The name, tulip, probably comes from the word *dulban* or *tuliban*, meaning turban, since the shape of the blooms suggest an inverted turban.

With so many choices, how do you pick what to grow? Two of the common ways to group tulips is by bloom time and flower height. Tulips can be divided into early, mid, and late season flowering and by heights ranging from short (less than 8 inches tall), to medium (8 to 18 inches tall) and tall (greater than 18 inches tall). If you plan to replant every year, choose any of the varieties, but use caution with the later blooming varieties, since in Arkansas climates you temperatures can begin to heat up in late spring, and the warmer the conditions during blooming, the shorter the bloom period.

Now look at color. Tulips come in a wide range of colors and bloom types. There are solid colors in a range of shades of pink, red, orange, yellow, purple and white. There are bi-colors, singles, doubles, lily-flowered and mottled foliage tulips. Some come with fringed flowers called Parrot tulips, and mottled ones called Rembrandts. So choose what you like, and plant a variety.

Resist the temptation to plant tulips in a long, single row which doesn't give you as much impact. Plant in blocks of color or in informal groups of 5 to 11 bulbs planted together. Plant each variety in a block unto itself, positioned next to a contrasting or complementary color. Choose varieties with different flowering times to extend the bloom season.

When planting tulips, you should always place the pointed end facing up. If you hope to have your tulip bulbs be perennial and bloom nicely every year, try to plant bulbs 10 inches deep. In the south, warm conditions cause bulbs to shut down quicker and sometimes they don't get the requisite 6-8 weeks of growth following flowering. Shallow planted bulbs also produce numerous tiny small bulbs which won't bloom the following year. Planting the bulbs deep forces the mother bulb to produce fewer but bigger bulbs after blooming with a better chance to produce flowers the following season. Tulips benefit from a ready supply of moisture during their spring growth but require an extended dry period during their summer dormancy so deep planting keeps the bulbs drier in the summer as well. Also, the deeper you plant a tulip, the tougher it will be. Tulips planted deeper have thicker stems and fall over less often. Under favorable conditions some varieties of tulips may flower for five years or more instead of the typical one or two. In our soils, sometimes planting this deep can be impossible. If such digging is beyond you, then just plant as deep as you can and replant every year. This ensures showy blooms each spring.

Tulips, like all spring flowering bulbs need a minimum of 12 weeks of temperatures below 55 degrees to satisfy their chilling requirement. The chilling requirement is an adaptation to ensure that the bulbs won't sprout immediately after planting which could kill the new growth with cold weather. It allows a more gradual growth in late winter with a spring bloom. If tulips do not get the required chilling requirement, the stems will not elongate and you will have short tulips. Tulips are often considered the king of the spring bulbs. If you haven't planted yet, you still have time, but get it done by mid-January.