

Growing Guide: Tulips

Like crocuses, hyacinths, daffodils, and other early bloomers, tulips herald the arrival of spring. Beloved for their elegant flower shapes and remarkable range of hues, tulips bring dazzling color to winter-weary gardens. Choose tulip varieties carefully and you can have tulips in bloom from early spring through early summer!



Fun Facts

- Tulips are popular in cut flower arrangements. The flowers will last for up to a week, and during that time the stems may grow an inch or more, often bending toward a light source. This stem growth is unusual in a cut flower.
- In the 1600s it was determined that the bold color streaks on some tulips was caused by a viral infection — one that would eventually kill the plants. Fortunately, breeders were able to reproduce these attractive effects without the virus.
- The majority of tulips are grown and exported by Holland. Keukenhof, in Lisse, is the world’s largest flower park, and over 7 million flowers are planted there every year, including many tulips. The park is only open for 8 weeks a year, in April and May.
- Tulip Mania. It’s hard to believe, but during the 1630s, tulips grew to be so popular in Europe that certain varieties, especially those with multicolored petals, became the most expensive flower in the world. The result was a frenzy that resulted in single bulbs selling for far more than many workers’ annual wages. Tulip mania, also known as “tulipomania,” was short-lived, and quickly led to an economic crisis affecting Holland’s entire economy.
- The flower is a favorite of painters, including Claude Monet, who captured the beauty of the Holland flower fields in his 1886 oil painting *Tulip Fields in Holland*.



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About Tulips

Tulips are bulb-forming perennials native to central Asia. The small, native “species tulips” are the ancestors of today’s larger, showier varieties. Plant breeders have developed thousands of varieties from just a handful of species.

Most tulips are rated for hardiness zones 3 to 7 or 8. Tulips are native to mountainous regions with cold winters, so they evolved to require a period of cold before they’ll break dormancy. Tulip bulbs are planted in the fall, and the bulbs contain enough stored energy to bloom the following spring. However, if the bulbs don’t get the extended period of cold they need the following winter (about 12 weeks), they may not bloom in subsequent years. Some gardeners in warmer zones treat tulips like annuals, planting a new batch of bulbs each fall.

Learn more about bulb botany and chilling requirements:

Bulbs: Fall Planting for Spring Blooms Activity

<https://kidsgardening.org/garden-activities-plant-fall-bulbs-for-spring-blooms/>

Bulb Botany Lesson Plan

<https://kidsgardening.org/lesson-plans-bulb-botany/>

Know that even under the best conditions, some tulips are considered short-lived — their longevity hampered by insufficiently cold winters, wet soil that rots the bulbs, or being eaten by voles, chipmunks, or deer.

How to Grow Tulips

Choosing a planting site. Tulips prefer full sun and well-drained soil. Plant them in groups, or “drifts,” for the most impact.

When to plant. Plant tulip bulbs 6 to 8 weeks before your ground freezes. The soil stays warm even as air temperatures cool, so the bulb has plenty of time to develop a strong root system in preparation for spring growth and bloom.

How to plant. You can plant bulbs in individual holes, or prepare soil in an entire bed. Either way, you’ll want to loosen soil to a depth of about 12”. Tulip bulbs vary in size; as a rule of thumb, plant bulbs 2 to 3 times as deep as they are tall. So if the bulb is 2” tall, plant it so that it is covered by 4 to 6” of soil. Plant the bulbs pointy side up.

Protecting the bulbs. Turn your back for a minute and your tulip bulbs may be dug up and munched on by a squirrel, rabbit, vole, deer, or other hungry visitor. Some gardeners fashion cages out of wire mesh and plant the bulbs inside them. Others cover the planting bed with

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chicken wire. And a tall fence is the only way to keep hungry deer at bay.

Savoring the show. Take time to enjoy spring's glory. Most tulip flowers last just a week or so before beginning to fade, so visit the garden often to see which flowers are at their peak. Note if there are any tall varieties that need staking or another type of support to keep them from toppling in wind and heavy rain.

Post-flowering care. As is the case with all spring-blooming bulbs, it's important to allow the foliage to continue to grow so it can replenish the food stores in the bulb — that is, unless you're treating your tulips like annuals and replanting each fall. Yellowing bulb foliage is unsightly, so it's handy to plant bulbs among large perennials, such as daylilies, that will hide the bulbs' foliage until it has died back completely and you can easily remove it.

Choosing Varieties

There are numerous classifications of tulips. Here are a few of them, in approximate order of bloom time.

Early-Season Tulips

Species tulips. These are some of the original tulips that were subsequently used by plant breeders to develop the bigger, showier varieties. Species tulips bloom early, sometimes along with daffodils. The plants are compact, usually just 4" to 12" tall, making them perfect for rock gardens and near walkways. *Tulipa bakeri*, *T. turkestanica*, *T. kaufmanniana* are three species; each includes multiple named varieties. Species tulips are some of the most reliably perennial — they'll return year after year, even multiplying.

Emperor tulips. Also called fosteriana tulips, emperor tulips are descendants of *Tulipa fosteriana*, a wild tulip from central Asia. They're prized for their early bloom time and large, vibrant flowers that open wide on sunny days. Growing 16-18" tall, Emperor tulips tend to be longer-lived and are more likely to return year after year than other large-flowered types of tulips.

Mid-Season Tulips

Darwin hybrid tulips. Long-lasting flowers in rich hues have a classic tulip form — a slightly blocky, cup-shaped silhouette — that makes them among the most popular types of tulips. Growing up to 24" tall they put on an impressive show, especially if planted in large groups. If they receive adequate winter chilling, Darwin hybrids will usually return to flower for at least a few years before flower quality starts to decline.

Triumph tulips. Available in the largest range of colors, Triumph tulips grow to medium height, from about 10" to 16" tall depending on variety, with strong stems that hold up to wind and rain better than their taller cousins. Flower shapes include elegant cups, open-topped goblets, and pyramids (narrowing at the top). Petals may multicolored, with streaks, stripes, feathers, or edges in contrasting hues. Although the flowers may return for a few years, plan on planting fresh bulbs each fall if you want a guaranteed showing in spring.

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Late-Season Tulips

Parrot tulips. With ruffled petals that may be twisted, fringed, and/or multicolored in seemingly haphazard patterns, parrot tulips seem the antithesis to more prim and proper tulip types. They surely command attention, both in the garden and in cut flower arrangements! These late-spring bloomers come into their own in late spring, after other tulips have faded. The huge blooms on tall stems are easily damaged by wind, so plant in a sheltered location. Although some plants may return for several years, it's a good idea to replant some every fall.

Double late tulips. Layers of petals give this group of tulips their other name, “peony-flowered tulips” or simply “peony tulips.” The large, bold blooms last for up to two weeks in the late spring garden, and many varieties are fragrant, too! This dazzle comes at a price, though: The flowers rarely return in subsequent years, at least not in their full glory. So plan to replant them each fall.



Classroom Connections:

Track spring's arrival by observing tulip bloom dates across North America through the Journey North Program. [Learn more.](#)

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