

fresh

focus

The world's most popular bulb flower, tulips are the quintessential symbol of spring.

By Bill McKinley AIFD and Bruce Wright

The story of “tulip mania” has come to be widely known: how tulip bulbs, introduced to the Netherlands from Turkey in 1593, were traded at higher and higher prices in a frenzy fed by financial speculation until the bottom fell out of the market in 1637, and entire fortunes were lost.

Perhaps it's not so surprising after all that tulips, with their deep-dyed hues and satin sheen, acquired a value higher than jewels. And yet, the tulips of the early 17th century were simple, unsophisticated flowers in comparison with the many hybrids that have come along since then. More than 3,000 varieties are registered, though only about 100 are commonly produced for today's commercial market. Of those sold as cut flowers, a high proportion were grown either in Holland or from bulbs that were cultivated there. The bulbs are planted in the autumn and lifted in the summer, after Holland's tourists have witnessed the beauty of the blossoms in the fields—a mere byproduct of the real object of production, the bulb.

Ironically, tulip mania was driven in part by the fascination with tulips that bore fantastic stripes. The extravagant coloration of these so-called Rembrandt tulips was only later understood to be the result of a virus, which produces unpredictable results and can spread from tulips to lilies. Today's tulip growers shun the virus, although some grow tulips that have been hybridized to resemble the original Rembrandts.



Beauty classified

Modern classifications range from the obvious singles and doubles to flower forms named for their distinctive shape or coloration. They include **lily-flowered** tulips, with pointed petals that arch outward; **fringed** tulips, with petal edges like frayed or crimped fabric; thickly-ruffled **parrot** tulips; and green-streaked **viridiflora** tulips. **Peony** tulips are late-blooming doubles, less common in the cut-flower market than in gardens, although some varieties, like the recently introduced Elisabeth, have achieved market success. On the high end of the market are **French** tulips, a name given to varieties (not necessarily grown in France) with extra-long stems and large, silky, bullet-shaped blooms.

Tulips are fifth on the list of the top ten cut flowers sold in the U.S. by stem count (after roses, carnations, chrysanthemums, and alstroemerias). They are especially popular with flower lovers who suffer from hay fever, as tulips are hypoallergenic, listed by the American Academy of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology as an allergy-safe, though pollen-producing, plant.

In design, tulips are notoriously unruly. They are strongly geotropic, bending away from the earth, and mildly phototropic, bending towards a light source. They will also continue to elongate (grow) after they are placed in designs. Some varieties may stretch up to two inches while others will barely elongate at all.

Wiring, slitting the stem, or other physical measures will not prohibit tulips' tendency to grow and curve. In general, what works better is to let tulips do their thing. Place tulips where they have room to lengthen and bend—and explain to customers that watching it happen is part of the tulips' charm.

Better yet, extend the life of these relatively short-lived flowers by using them in vase arrangements rather than in floral foam. They look beautiful simply dropped into a vase, all at the same height, preferably in luxurious quantity. Remember that in design, sometimes less is more—but when it comes to fresh, gorgeous, in-season tulips, more is more. 🌷

Care tips

- Select stems with the flower buds closed and about half colored. Avoid stems with yellow leaves, a sign of excessive age or poor shipping conditions.
- Remove the lower white portion of the stem for better water uptake and place stems in a room-temperature flower-food solution. Many growers recommend special “bulb solution” flower foods which contain a germicide. Sugar-based flower foods reportedly return marginal effects on lengthening vase life.
- Keep the plastic sleeve on the bundle during hydration and conditioning to help reduce stem curvature. Or, to straighten already curved stems, gently straighten stems and wrap bunches tightly in newspaper prior to hydration.
- Store tulips at 34 degrees Fahrenheit, providing good light for flower color development.
- Do not place tulips together in a bucket with daffodils, as daffodils exude a toxic chemical when freshly cut that will severely shorten the vase life of tulips.



Tulip
Tulipa spp

Availability: Year-round, but peak season is January to May
Bunch size: 10 stems
Vase life: 3 to 7 days

Introduced to the marketplace about a year ago, Elisabeth (pictured on the opposite page) is a double tulip; on this page are parrot tulips Rococo and Super Parrot. Rococo is also featured in the design above. The satin sheen of tulip petals accords well with metal containers, while matte silver and pewter complement the coloring of warm red tulips by contrast, as in these photos from the International Flower Bulb Center (www.bulb.com).

