GROWER'S ALMANAC: TIMELESS TIPS FOR PLANTING

BY MATT MATTUS

TULIP LITERACY

Tulips come with baggage—historical, horticultural, and emotional. We swear them off, then buy them again. This is a guide to understanding why.

Published in 1613 by Nuremberg apothecary and botanist Basilius Besler, the monumental florilegium (a catalog of flowers), *Hortus Eystettensis,* artistically records the plants of the garden of the Prince-Bishop of Eichstätt in Bavaria.

HOW HOLLAND BECAME *TULIP COUNTRY*

If tulips hail from the rugged mountains of Turkey, the Caucasus, and Central Asia, it's fair to ask how the Netherlands—about as mountainous as a billiard table—became the undisputed capital of tulipdom. The answer lies in geography, geology, and a dose of Dutch ingenuity.

The Netherlands offers a near-made-to-order environment for bulb growing. Much of its prime bulb land sits in polders—flat, reclaimed fields protected by dikes—with sandy, rich, impeccably well-drained soils. A high water table and dense canal network make irrigation less a challenge than a baseline condition.

The climate seals the deal. Winters are mild, springs are long and cool, and weather extremes are rare—exactly what tulips want.

THE MAKING OF THE MODERN TULIP

1559
The first recorded bloom of a wild tulip species in Europe appears in Augsburg, Germany.

LATE 1500s
Early crosses of the naturally occurring *Tulipa* × *gesneriana* emerge, igniting widespread enthusiasm for tulips in European gardens.

1634–1637
Tulipmania grips the Dutch Republic; the speculative market collapses abruptly in February 1637.

LATE 1600s
Novel forms such as parrot and striped tulips remain in cultivation, long after the speculative frenzy fades.

EARLY 1800s
Botanical exploration of Central Asia expands, introducing new wild tulip species to European collections.

When Beauty *Was a* Disease

The most coveted "broken" tulips of the 17th through 19th centuries—the flamed and feathered flowers celebrated by English florist societies—owed their beauty to a virus. Tulip breaking virus disrupted pigment production, creating dramatic streaks and flames, but it also weakened bulbs and shortened their lives.

The damage was real, but the patterns were irresistible. Entire societies formed to judge these tulips, treating them as living artifacts rather than plants with a future. Named cultivars were prized, traded, and meticulously cataloged, even as the virus slowly undermined them.

'Semper Augustus', a crimson-and-white broken tulip, became the symbol of Tulipmania, reportedly trading for the price of a house at the height of the 17th-century frenzy.

Modern tulips with similar markings are bred to be virus-free. The look remains. The cost does not. What changed is our tolerance for fragility masquerading as rarity.

Why Tulip Names *Rarely* Help Gardeners

There are more than 3,000 registered named tulip varieties, with roughly half still circulating in the trade. That longevity is striking, given how little the basic tulip form has changed over the past 150 years—one stem, one flower, endless variations on a single idea.

To manage that abundance, tulips are divided into 15 official groups. These divisions are based on traits like flower shape, height, bloom time, and breeding history, a system designed primarily for breeders and large-scale growers.

For gardeners, the categories are often more confusing than helpful. Catalogs rely on formal names—Single Late, Double Late, Kaufmanniana—while gardeners translate them into looser, more visual shorthand: Peony tulips, Parrot tulips, Waterlily tulips. Different labels, same plants. Tulips reward attention to timing and habit far more than memorizing divisions.

'Semper Augustus', the most expensive tulip sold during tulipmania. Unknown artist, pre-1640.

What *Are* French Tulips *And* Why Can't You Find Them?

Floral designers love long-stemmed "French tulips," and gardeners inevitably go looking for them in catalogs. Here's the anticlimax: they're not a separate class. Most are Single Late tulips grown under conditions that encourage height and elegance. "French" describes posture, not genetics. Think runway model, not passport.

To grow your own, plant bulbs deep (6–8 inches) and with dense spacing. Cool soils and some protection from wind (in a high tunnel or greenhouse) and temperature swings also help produce those tall, refined stems.

1871–1904
Tulipa greigii, *T. kaufmaniana*, and *T. fosteriana* are collected and introduced—the parents of all modern tulips.

1923
Triumph tulips are developed through deliberate Dutch hybridizing programs.

1928
Tulip breaking virus is identified as the cause of the historic flame and feather patterns seen in earlier striped varieties.

1943
D. W. Lefeber creates the popular true Darwin Hybrid tulips by crossing Darwin types with *T. fosteriana.*

1950s–Present
Improved Darwin Hybrids become widely available, and continued refinement across all tulip groups expands species, forms, and colors.

A Gardener's Guide to Tulip Types

Division 01

Single Early

Classic cup-shaped early bloomers that handle spring weather well.

Division 02

Double Early

Short plants with fully double, peony-like flowers early in the season.

Division 03

Triumph

Mid-season, sturdy, reliable, and the largest group.

Division 04

Darwin Hybrid

Very tall, vigorous, with large blooms and the best chance of returning.

Division 05

Single Late

Tall, late-blooming, with egg-shaped flowers.

Division 06

Lily-Flowered

Slender with pointed, flared petals.

Division 07

Fringed (Crispa)

Serrated or fringed petal edges.

Division 08

Viridiflora

Flowers streaked with green

Division 09

Rembrandt

Striped or feathered tulips bred to mimic historic broken colors.

Division 10

Parrot

Large, ruffled, curled, and twisted irregular petals.

Division 11

Double-Late

Tall with fully double, peony-style blooms late in spring.

Division 12

Kaufmanniana

Early, low-growing, with open flat or water lily-shaped flowers.

Division 13

Fosteriana (Emperor)

Large, early blooms with bold, broad petals

Division 14

Greigii

Compact tulips prized as much for patterned foliage as for flowers.

Division 15

Species (Botanical)

Wild tulips and close relatives that are small, hardy, and long-lived.

When *Tulip* Wisdom Crosses the Atlantic

European garden magazines often present tulips as obligingly perennial—lifted, stored, replanted, and blooming again with reassuring regularity. That advice works where summers are cool, damp, and mild. Under those conditions, tulips can be coaxed into reasonably reliable repeat performances.

In much of the United States, it's another story. Our patchwork of climates—many hot, humid, or both—makes long-term tulip success far less assured. For most American gardeners, the simplest and most predictable approach is to treat tulips as annuals: enjoy the spring display, compost the bulbs, and start fresh in fall.

Yes, some gardeners faithfully lift, feed, and coddle bulbs year after year. Sometimes it works. Often it doesn't. The disconnect isn't skill or commitment—it's climate.

Which *Tulips* Actually Return?

Tulips are often described as one-season wonders, with gardeners advised to rely on so-called species tulips for a more perennial display. While all tulips are botanically perennial, most—species included—rarely return for more than a few years under garden conditions.

There are exceptions. Among the most reliable are certain Darwin Hybrid tulips (like 'Coral Pride', 'Ivory Floradale', and 'Juliette'), provided their foliage is allowed to die back naturally after flowering.

Two cultivars stand out for longevity: red 'Apeldoorn' and yellow 'Golden Parade'. Under good conditions, they can return for years—sometimes decades, though five to 10 is typical.

In my garden, seven golden 'Apeldoorn' tulips have returned annually since 2002, earning deserved respect.

The Challenge of Forcing *Tulips*

Tulips are among the most difficult bulbs to force successfully. Compared to daffodils or hyacinths, they are far less forgiving, and failure usually shows up as weak growth or missing flower buds.

The most common cause is inadequate chilling. Tulips require a long, uninterrupted cold period—typically 16 to 19 weeks at 38–45°F—to form roots and properly develop flower buds. Bring them out too early, and they respond with slow growth or no bloom at all.

They are also unusually sensitive to conditions during storage and rooting. Too much moisture encourages rot and disease. Too little moisture stalls root formation. Temperatures above 50°F can prevent growth altogether. Even ethylene gas—released by ripening fruit such as apples—can damage developing buds if bulbs are stored in a refrigerator.

Many forcing failures trace back to bulb quality, not technique. Bulbs that linger on warm retail displays may already be compromised, while reputable mail-order suppliers store bulbs under controlled conditions that better support forcing.

Tulips are exacting by nature. When forced well, they are spectacular. When rushed or mishandled, they simply refuse.

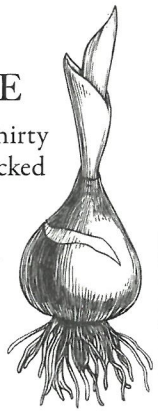
From "Les Fleurs de Jardins, tome I: Les Fleurs de Printemps" printed in 1829.

A Northern Gardener's Trick for Potted Tulips

Tulip bulbs tolerate cold but not repeated freezing and thawing, which makes overwintering them in containers risky in northern climates. The workaround is simple. Plant bulbs in plain black nursery pots and sink the entire pot into the ground for winter—a raised bed works well. In early spring, once growth appears, lift the pot and slip the intact root ball into a decorative container. Where voles are an issue, cover pots with chicken wire in fall, and add extra drainage holes so winter moisture can escape.

Then, come spring, you can arrange pots around your doorstep or terrace and briefly pretend you are a Danish guy named Claus.

Tulips are a Numbers Game



One feels lonely. A few feel unsure. Thirty scattered bulbs look like poor turnout. Packed tight, they look like a sold-out show.

For bold color in the border, excavate a section and plant bulbs close together—touching, even—for maximum impact. This is a one-season strategy, but it's the approach used by flower farmers, public gardens, and those iconic Dutch displays.

If you want catalog-level drama, think shoulder to shoulder. The same rule applies to containers: pack bulbs tightly, and for forced pots, consider a second layer to amplify the show.

Didier's Tulip, an Unlikely American

Likely a garden escape from the 1500s, *Tulipa* × *gesneriana*—often called Didier's tulip—is a complex hybrid, or neo-species, with roots in western Asia and is widely considered the foundation of most modern tulips.

It has naturalized in only a few places worldwide, including a single county in Massachusetts, with scattered reports as far west as Ohio. With its vivid red flowers and unlikely persistence, it may be the closest thing to an "American" tulip, despite its global origins.

Its arrival is generally traced to mid-17th-century Dutch settlers in New Amsterdam—modern-day New York City—though some historians place its earliest foothold just across the river in present-day New Jersey. The exact path remains uncertain, fitting for a plant that has always traveled easily across borders.