

Tulips | A Tulip Time Tradition



Although the tulip has played a major role in Dutch history, it was not originally native to the Netherlands. The tulip came from the Mediterranean, Asia, India and China, where it grows naturally in the mountainous foothills. In Persia, the flowers were adopted as an emblem of the Turkish court and they have been cultivated since the early sixteenth century. While the Persian name for tulip is "lale," the genus name "tulipa" was derived from the word meaning turban. A likely explanation is that the first Europeans to view this unusual flower were told that it was "tulipant" or "tulband," words describing the tulip's turban-like shape. In 1554, an Austrian diplomat returned from Turkey with tulip seeds and shared them with his friend, horticultural expert Carolus Clusius. The professor of botany began to experiment with the newly discovered flower.

When Clusius left the Royal Medicinal Garden in Prague because of a religious dispute, he resettled in Holland and began cultivating tulips there. When asked to sell some bulbs, he refused, naming a price much too high for anyone to pay. It is reported that his best tulips were then stolen and the seeds sold all over Holland by the thieves. Before long, the beautifully colored flowers became popular around the country. Because they were so well suited to formal gardens, tulips rapidly became the fashionable flower for the wealthy classes. Many experimented with crossbreeding, and new and fascinating varieties were produced. The demand for these new varieties drove market prices up and precipitated the phenomenon known as "tulipmania."



Tulipmania is a unique event in the history of horticulture. Because of the tulip's tendency to make dramatic and seemingly unpredictable changes in appearance from one generation to the next, certain varieties, particularly broken or mutated ones like "Rembrandt" and "Zomershoon," became highly desirable. In 1634, these unusual blooms became status symbols, and tulipmania reigned for the next three years. It is now known that a tulip virus causes these breaks in a variety, causing stripes and unusual petal shapes. But at that time, growers did not know what caused the new variants, and societies were formed in Holland's taverns to organize the purchase and sale of tulip bulbs. At first, plants were sold after they had bloomed and the quality of the flower was apparent. However, as the frenzy for new crossbreeds increased, bulbs began to be purchased while they were still below ground. This speculation reached dizzying proportions when people began selling their possessions for bulbs. One "Viceroy" bulb sold for two loads of wheat, four loads of rye, four fat oxen, eight fat pigs, twelve sheep, two barrels of butter, a thousand pounds of cheese, two hogsheads of wine, four barrels of special beer, a silver beaker, a suit of clothes and complete bed, the entire value of which was 2,500 florins. Houses were mortgaged for the price of a few tulip bulbs. In 1636 the market became saturated and crashed, resulting in thousands of bankruptcies and staggering personal property losses.



The tulip came to America with the colonial settlers. By 1760 at least fifty varieties were available in New England. The arrival of large numbers of Dutch immigrants to the Midwest in the early 1800's boosted interest in this flower, now native to their homeland. Today, bulb growing is an important industry in the Netherlands. All new varieties are recorded in the International Register of Tulip Names held by the Royal General Bulbgrowers' Association of Holland.

In Holland, Michigan, home of the annual Tulip Festival since 1929, visitors can view the more than 550,000 tulips planted throughout the greater Holland area. Special tulip lanes lead sightseers along six miles of curbside tulips. The tulip has a history of being transplanted, and this gracious flower is now a part of Holland's history and heritage, as a reminder of the beautiful Dutch countryside many left to colonize Michigan's wild shore.

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