

# THE STORY OF PLANTS: THE TULIP

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“YOU’D THINK THAT people would have had enough of silly love songs.” I was a lonely teenager who hated silly love songs, the advances of gangly girls, and high school dances when Paul McCartney released that pop song. I loved my bike and books, and flowers. I loved one in particular, the tulip.

Years later I still love tulips. I love that my first memory is of a tulip. I grabbed a big red ‘Apeldoorn’ in my three-year-old hands, looked inside, and saw the black star at its base. That’s the end of the memory but the beginning of my affair with tulips.

I love when pounds and pounds of them arrive on my doorstep each fall; they’re cheap. I love the feel of the succulent parchment sheathed bulbs in my hands. I love when the first green horn of foliage breaks the soil in winter. I love how they force themselves into spring with a satyr’s vigor. I love the apple green buds, tight as beetles, and I love when those green buds slowly show color, fling themselves open one sunny day, then shut again by nightfall. I love how this dance goes on for weeks, until giddy with exhaustion, the tulips collapse.

I love the tulip’s meteoric rise to popularity. Barely noticed by botanists or herbalists until the 16th century, the Turks began humanity’s grand obsession with them. Creating great celebrations to honor them, they squandered fortunes to obtain the most unique; their pendant



*Tulipa ‘Happy Generation’ (Daniel Mount)*

was for the narrowest dagger-like petals. The species *Tulipa acuminata* is thought by many not a species but a stable selection from this period. I love that the “disease” tulipomania that started in Turkey moved west infecting every great nation of 16th century Europe, bringing many to financial ruin like a modern day real estate bubble. The Dutch were hit hardest, nearly destroying their burgeoning economy over an ephemeral bulb.

But that did not stop the tulip or the Dutch. In 1996, the Royal General Bulbgrowers Association of Holland listed 5,600 cultivars in their international register. Nearly 2,600 of those are readily available. For a tulip lover this is maddening, though I have my favorites anyway. Many are Darwin tulips known for their height and large flowers. I love the modern ‘Perestroyka’ though sometimes they behave like gangly teenage girls bowing under spring showers. But I

love the grace with which their long stems snake around to lift those proud flowers back upright. I love the darkly double ‘Black Hero’, though I find most peony flowered tulips unnecessarily aberrant. I love the earliness of the Kaufmanniana hybrid ‘The First’. As a matter of fact, like the tulipomaniacs of the 16th century I love the striped or “broken” tulips the most. I love ‘Blueberry Ripple’, ‘Happy Generation’, and ‘Keizerskroon’, in cultivation since 1750.

I love Emperor tulips, lily flowered tulips, early tulips, and late tulips, and of course the 120 or so species in the genus. *T. whittallii*, with its strange range of colors, exquisite form, and propensity to naturalize, is without a doubt my favorite tulip.

I love the many tributes to the flower from Anna Pavord’s passionately erudite book *The Tulip* to Tiny Tim’s eerily quaint version of “Tiptoe through the Tulips.” I love Monet’s painterly tulip portraits as well as the more austere black and white photographic treatment Mapplethorpe gives them.

And I love tulip festivals. I love to join the hordes in the Skagit Valley jubilant with tulips in spring, proof that the world hasn’t had enough of tulips, just like silly love songs. 🌷

*Read more of Daniel’s reflections on plants and gardens at [www.mountgardens.com](http://www.mountgardens.com)*