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What You Need to Know Before Planting Tulips

It's a common frustration. You buy 25, 100, maybe even 300 tulip bulbs, plant them in the fall and enjoy a great display in the spring. But the following spring, all you get is a smattering of flowers and maybe a bunch of leaves.

"What happened?" you ask yourself. "Aren't tulips supposed to come back? My grandmother has tulips that have bloomed every spring for as long as she can remember? Did I do something wrong?"

According to Tim Schipper, owner of Colorblends wholesale flowerbulbs in Bridgeport, Conn., you are not to blame. "It's in the nature of tulips," he says. "Most are not strong perennializers. They don't flower well the second year after planting."

Why Tulips Stop Flowering

The tulip bulbs you buy and plant in the fall have been groomed to bloom. They were raised in sandy Dutch soil and fertilized in just the right measure.

When they bloomed in the spring (the same year you bought them), the flowers were cut off soon after they opened to keep them from drawing too much energy from the bulbs below. They continued to grow for several more weeks in famously cool Dutch weather. ("Holland is further north than Newfoundland, which is over 300 miles north of the tip of Maine," Schipper notes.) After going dormant in early summer, the bulbs were dug and stored in a climate-controlled warehouse to mimic a long, hot, bone-dry summer in the mountains of Central Asia, which is where most tulips are native.

"All of this TLC yields a high percentage of flowering-size bulbs, including many top-size bulbs, the cream of the crop, which measure 12 centimeters in circumference and sometimes larger," Schipper says. "A top-size bulb can't get bigger, but it will get smaller, typically by splitting into two or more smaller bulbs."

So you start with big, plump tulip bulbs and plant them in your garden. Do you have sand for soil? Do you monitor your soil's fertility and apply just what's needed when it's needed? Do you have long cool springs in your climate the way they do in Holland? Do you cut the flowers off right after they open? The answer to most of these questions is most likely no.

"Under less-than-perfect garden conditions, when the bulbs split into smaller bulbs, those smaller bulbs are unlikely ever to grow to flowering size," says Schipper. "Some may also rot due to heavy soil or excess moisture. And so your breathtaking tulip display dwindles to little or nothing. That said, I have a few red tulips that have bloomed every spring for 10 years. They just refuse to give up."

Tulips That May Come Back

The good news is that some tulips are willing to bloom well for more than one spring. Their bulbs are slow to split or they split unevenly, so that one of the smaller bulbs is still big enough to flower. "Eventually, flowering becomes sparse, but you may get two or three good displays before you feel the need to replant," Schipper says.

The best known of these so-called perennial tulips are the Darwin Hybrids. This group includes such well-known varieties as Apeldoorn, Oxford and Pink Impression. All make big bulbs and big flowers in bold colors. They bloom in the middle of the spring bulb season.

Almost as familiar are the Fosteriana tulips, which include the Emperor series (Red, White, Yellow and Orange). These tulips are more compact and earlier to bloom than the Darwin Hybrids, but their vase-shaped flowers are large and very showy.

Further down the list are the Greigii and Kaufmanniana tulips, which are generally shorter and earlier than the Darwin Hybrids and Fosterianas and often have attractively spotted leaves.

And finally there are the wild, or species, tulips. They are descendants or near-relatives of the tulips that can still be found growing in the valleys and on the rugged slopes of mountains in such places as Iran, Afghanistan and Kazakhstan. They are colorful, attractive and remarkably persistent in the landscape.

Spring Beauty on the Cheap

If you can buy a tulip that may flower for three years, why would you consider one that will only flower once? The answer, Schipper says, is that some of the most beautiful tulips are not good perennials. "People plant them because at 35 to 45 cents a bulb, they won't break the bank. Compared to other leisure activities, planting bulbs is less expensive, takes less time, is longer lasting and more beautiful. When you look at it that way, even a one-shot tulip gives a great return on investment."

For More Information

You can learn more about tulips and other spring-flowering bulbs by visiting www.colorblends.com or you can call toll free (888) 847-8637 to request the Colorblends 2008 wholesale catalog.

Some tulips are willing to put on a good show for two or three years, sometimes more. This is a Darwin Hybrid tulip named Pink Impression. It is one of the most reliable of the "perennial" tulips.

For more help with planting tulips, contact Wewerka Construction Management, Inc. at (703) 330-3400 or email us at wewerka@wewerkalandscape.com