

Tale from the Garden!

Ah, tulips! There's a garden full of them on Northfield Road, which has just erupted in full colour. You'd think you can hardly get anything more Dutch, but the tulip is actually pure Iranian, pure Afghan and pure Kazakhstan. Nomads brought the colourful flowers to Turkey, where many sultans started wearing a tulip on their turban. That's how the flower got its name: 'tulipan' means 'turban'.

The ever-cheerful tulip comes in white, red, yellow, pink, purple, orange, green or with multi-coloured petals, providing you with a wide palette of colours to "paint" your garden with. The shapes of the tulip are also a feast for the eye. You can find them with a single or double row of petals, whilst there are also eye-catching fringed and parrot tulips with serrated petals, and there's the playful lily-flowered tulip. If you gave someone a tulip in the sixteenth century, you were giving them a fortune. At that time the flower was incredibly popular and a speculative trade in tulip bulbs developed. In 17th-century Amsterdam, a tulip bulb was worth more than a diamond. Then, you could buy a whole canal-side house in Amsterdam for the price of one tulip bulb! A nice bunch of tulips now costs just a couple of pounds, but the symbolism has gained in value. If you give someone tulips nowadays, you're also giving them a message. Hence red tulips mean passionate love, and with black tulips you're saying: 'I love you so much I will sacrifice everything for you.' So don't give those to just anybody!



Tulips can be found growing wild from North Africa and southern Europe across to north-west China. The tulips had been well loved for centuries in the Ottoman Empire as well as in what are now India, Pakistan and Afghanistan, where the flowers decorated gardens and palaces. The greatest diversity can be found in three mountain ranges in central Asia: the Pamirs, the Tian Shan and the Hindu Kush. With cold winters, long springs with cold nights, and a dry summer, the climate in these regions is ideal for tulips. Tulips need a cold night and a cold winter in order to be able to grow, which is why they can't be cultivated in a warm climate.

Was it the tulip's blood-red colour that made it such a symbolic flower for the peoples who first saw it? Many stories – such as the legend of Farhad and Shirin – were told to explain the tulip's beauty, in which it was often synonymous with perfection or eternity.

The tulip was first discovered in Turkey around a thousand years ago, and its origin story is reminiscent of Romeo and Juliet. In Turkish legend, there were once two star-crossed lovers, a princess named Shirin, and Farhad, a stonemason. Shirin's father opposed the love match (because one cannot allow a princess to marry a lowly tradesman) and so he ordered Farhad to complete a complex task. While the stonemason was off doing as he was told, Shirin's father sent the young man a message saying that the princess was dead. Overcome by grief, Farhad took his own life. Of course, once Shirin heard this news, she ran off to find him. Upon discovering his body, she too killed herself, and as their blood pooled together, it formed the tulip.

In the 16th century, Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq was serving as the ambassador of the Habsburg monarchy to the Ottoman Empire. While visiting Turkish sultan Suleiman the Magnificent, a fan of tulips, he was given some bulbs to take back to Vienna. De Busbecq then passed the tulip bulbs on to his friend, Flemish botanist Charles de l'Écluse, the prefect to the Emperor's garden in Vienna. When d'Écluse left Vienna to teach at a university in Leiden, Netherlands, he brought the bulbs along and planted them there. As the director of the botanical gardens in Leiden, he experimented with the exotic flower - and was so successful that the tulip became a highly sought-after import among the local wealthy residents.

The flowers were especially sought after due to their sensitivity. The wet, cold climate did not serve the bulbs well, and they were susceptible to diseases. One particular virus was spread via aphids from flower to flower - but it made the petals multi-coloured, resulting in especially exclusive flowers. Known as Rembrandt tulips, the colourful variety was later artificially bred.

The tulip quickly became a status symbol. As commercial sales developed, prices became exorbitant. Some people even traded everything they owned to buy a bulb - not knowing whether it would ever grow. The coming harvests were speculated on and the market grew out of control - until, one day in spring 1637, the tulip market crashed when prices dropped over night. Many people had grown wealthy on tulip mania, but most had not seen the setback coming and lost everything.

Tulips have, however, managed to save the lives of other people. Centuries later, in the autumn of 1944, the Allies lost the Battle of Arnhem to the Nazis. As a result, large parts of the Netherlands were cut off from coal and food supplies, since the Germans blocked the supply routes. That winter, a famine known in Dutch as the "Hongerwinter" ensued, claiming as many as 22,000 lives. During World War II, Dutch tulip growers hadn't planted any flowers, instead storing their many bulbs in dry places. The authorities decided to distribute the tulip bulbs as food and convinced the growers to sell them. The bulbs proved to be nutritious and easy to cook. Though they probably didn't taste very good, they saved many lives!

The Dutch are now the number one exporters of flowers worldwide, and run 80 percent of the tulip trade. The tulips are available early in the year thanks to flower nurseries that keep the bulbs chilled, mimicking winter regardless of the season. After three or four months of cold, the nurseries artificially warm the air, the tulips register a change in season and the bulbs begin to sprout as if it were spring. There are about 4,000 different tulip varieties & planted in the fields in the autumn, starting in mid-March they light up the landscape all the way to the horizon – no wonder Holland is regarded as the garden of Europe. The scent of blossoms wafts through the air over fields and flower beds. At the high point of the flowering bulb season in Holland, on April 23, the air smells of tulips, hyacinths and narcissus. That's when the decorated floats of the "Bloemencorso Bollenstreek," the Bollenstreek Flower Parade, pass through the streets between Haarlem and Leiden. The country estate, 'Keukenhof', which dates from 1642, is now the main attraction of the Bollenstreek region. Its park comprises more than 30 hectares. From mid-March until late May, seven million bulb flowers bloom in it. Every year, more than 80,000 visitors from around the world come to the tiny Dutch village of Lisse to take in this amazing & huge flower show.

The Tulip is now the national flower of Holland, having become the symbol for this small European country that is recognized worldwide. Hence it is associated with good luck and fortune, as well as love.

Petal Power: 5 Ways to Teach with Tulips

I remember, when I was teaching in Primary Schools, using the Tulip as a teaching resource – it was the perfect flower to teach children about colours, plants, and the importance of caring for the natural world.

Nurturing our children's curiosity about how things grow is as easy as taking a walk around the neighbourhood to look for emerging shoots, flowers, and bright green leaves unfurling from the trees. But you can also take that curiosity to a whole other level with the help of this quintessential Easter flower, the tulip. Available in bunches at this time of year, the tulip is the perfect flower to encourage little budding scientists to look, think, and learn even more about the natural world.

1. Tulips can teach ... the parts of a flower.

Because their individual parts are easy for small hands to grab, tulips are great for dissecting. I remember asking the children to separate all the different parts of the tulip, explaining what each part does to help the flower stay alive and grow. After all, every part of a flower has a job to do! And so have we! 'Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.' (Colossians 3 v23-24)

2. Tulips can teach ... patience.

Planting tulips teaches patience, because they are often planted in the autumn, many months before they'll flower in the spring. Although tulips can be grown from seeds, most gardeners use bulbs. With a shape similar to a small onion, each tulip bulb actually has a complete baby plant tucked away inside! These hearty little things don't need much more than water, as the bulb also has food inside to help the plant grow into a flower year after year. And patience is a virtue – 'Love is patient, love is kind' (1 Corinthians 13:4-7).

3. Tulips can teach ... colours.

Tulips can be found in almost every colour of the rainbow, which make them a great teaching tool for learning colour vocabulary. We live in a multi-coloured world & it is beautiful! Jesus ministered to all people, regardless of background. His ministry of presence demonstrated engagement, compassion, love, acceptance and forgiveness for people of all backgrounds and walks of life. Galatians 3 v28 – "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

4. Tulips can teach ... respect for living things.

When children can identify the parts of a flower that help it grow, they will begin to understand that plants and flowers are living things. Many children love picking flowers and leaves, so it's important to instil a sense of respect for plants (especially when they're growing in other people's' gardens!). A good rule of thumb is to have children ask permission before they pick a flower. If a flower is in a public park or neighbour's garden, we can show children how to smell, look at, and admire a flower without picking it. Respect for plants and nature helps children develop compassion, respect for belongings and the environment, and positive feelings about themselves as caring people. Compassion, respect & care for others – all things we should have & do in Jesus' name. 'My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.' (John 15 v12) As Jesus shows us in being the 'Good Shepherd', he loves us in an extraordinary, incredible way. It's up to us to take the love we receive from him, and find ways to bring that love and goodwill into our community.

5. Tulips (and all flowers) can inspire - joy.

One of the most important things in the Christian life is joy. True joy is a gift from the Lord. In Scripture we see that joy is one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit. Joy comes from believing God, belonging to His Kingdom, and knowing Jesus as Lord. And remember, 'A cheerful look brings joy to the heart ...' (Proverbs 15 v30) and if you see someone without a smile, give them one of yours.