

By Kylee Baumle

The anticipation of spring and its delay in arriving this year made us embrace it with more enthusiasm than usual. That makes it hard to believe that we're already past snowdrop, crocus and reticulated iris season. We're into daffodils and tulips now and our gardens have exploded in glorious rainbow colors.

Tulips are an interesting lot. Originating in the mountains of Turkey (it's their national flower), the cultivated tulip that comes to mind for most of us has been hybridized from a much smaller species. We have many hybrid tulips in our landscape, but my favorites by far are the sweet little species tulips.

Miniature anything usually has a cuteness factor and tulips are no exception. But beyond that, species tulips are known to be much more reliable about coming back year after year and even naturalizing, than their hybrid cousins.

Finding species tulips to plant in the fall isn't difficult, but you'll likely need to take to the internet and order them rather than seeking them out locally. A couple of my favorite varieties are 'Little Beauty', a magenta-colored one with a dark purple eye, and 'Alba Caerulea Oculata', a pure white with an indigo eye. Two commonly found varieties are 'Lady Jane' and 'Ice Stick', pink and white ones which I can never tell apart.

In the sixteenth century, tulips were imported to the Netherlands and because it was a flower very different from those that were typical of that part of the world, it became highly popular and sought after. Hybridizing began and tulips became larger and more dramatic, leading to the economic phenomenon known as "Tulipomania."

Particularly in demand were the bulbs that produced "broken" tulips. These were bi-colored flowers that exhibited a flame pattern on their petals. This coloration was not predictable and was later found to be caused by a mosaic tulip virus. The tulips we have today that look like this,

however, are bred to have this coloration and are stable, not “sick.”

At one point during Tulipomania, tulips were so valued that a single bulb of certain varieties sold for more than ten times a skilled worker’s annual salary! Eventually, supply exceeded demand and the market fell, leading to many bankrupt tulip brokers.

Today, tulips are much beloved the world over - they’re the third most popular flower, next to the rose and chrysanthemum - and they herald spring in a variety of colors and forms.

Botanically, tulips are sorted into 15 divisions: single early, double early, Triumph, Darwin hybrids, single late, lily-flowered, fringed, viridiflora, Rembrandt, parrot, double late (peony-flowered), Kaufmanniana, Fosteriana, Greigii, and species. In our area, the types that are most likely to return each year are the species tulips and the Darwin hybrids because of their being crossed with species types.

There are over 3,000 varieties of tulips, but red ones continue to be the most popular color. They are an edible flower, which some think has a bean-like flavor, but others think they taste like lettuce. I’ve never tasted a tulip petal, but imagine how pretty they would be in a salad! The bulbs themselves should not be eaten, but try telling that to skunks or squirrels, who are known to dig them up for a snack.

We’re lucky to be able to grow tulips rather easily here in the north. Due to the need for vernalization (weeks of cold temperatures needed by a plant in order to produce blooms), tulips are just one plant that cannot be grown in the ground year after year in warmer climates.

Read Kylee’s blog, Our Little Acre, at www.ourlittleacre.com and on Facebook at www.facebook.com/OurLittleAcre. Contact her at PauldingProgressGardener@gmail.com.