



Just-in-Time Tulips

BY BRUCE WRIGHT

Budget-friendly and always in style, tulips are increasingly a year-round option for florists.

T conic in form, tulips are one of the few flowers that almost anyone can recognize and name. Adding to their universal appeal, they are available at low price points and are virtually self-arranging: Plop a bunch of them into a vase, and they will find their own way into acrobatic, graceful and vibrant bouquets.

SUNNY_BABY/SHUTTERSTOCK

These qualities — especially the price — make standard tulips popular with retailers of all stripes, including mass marketers. But florists know there are more than just off-the-rack varieties. You can keep heads turning with parrot and peony tulips, fringed and lily-flowering varieties. Or you can wow your customers with “French” tulips, grown exclusively in warm, sunny regions like the south of France (or southern California), with their long and sinuous stems that give a couture look.

Tulips are strongly linked to spring, yet they are capable of adapting nimbly to year-round supply. Red and white tulips at Christmas time, pink and yellow tulips in the spring, orange tulips in autumn? Right now, tulips are available in a wide selection, perfect for summer sales, from California growers and others across the country.

How do they always seem to be just where you need them, exactly when you need them? How can a flower defy the seasons and still be affordable? The credit goes to nature’s little battery pack: the bulb.

Ready, Set, Bloom

Botanical historians think that flower bulbs evolved when the Earth’s climate was getting colder — and when the warm season, when plants are able to grow and flower, was getting shorter.

Flower bulbs are designed to store energy during the winter. When spring arrives, they have already started preparing to bloom. Slice open a tulip bulb and you may be able to see the flower in embryo — petals, stamens, and pistil — surrounded by the fleshy “scales” that provide quick nourishment.

In nature, tulips stand ready to trumpet spring’s arrival with their speedy flowering. In a greenhouse, the same quick flowering period — usually only three weeks — accounts for why tulips cost less than many other cut flowers.

The key to both quick flowering and cost savings is the bulb. It’s a storage unit, but also a living plant; it requires not only expert cultivation but also careful preparation for blooming. The techniques used in growing tulip bulbs are of course important to the quality of the cut flowers. But so is the time in between: first a warm period, when the flower inside the bulb develops, then a cold period.

In the modern world of commercial floriculture, the cold period can vary as to temperature and duration, depending on the target date for flowering, location and growing technique. This in-between time must be handled with precision and with specialized equipment. It very often falls, not to the bulb producer, nor to the cut-flower grower, but to a Dutch exporter of flower bulbs.

The Delicate Dutch Handoff

Wherever tulips are grown, chances are good that the bulbs came from Holland. Dutch exporters are key actors in the tulip market, providing a varied selection along with quality assurance.

So how do tulip growers in California and elsewhere find the perfect partner to care for and ferry their precious cargo? Enter the annual Tulip Trade Event. Held in mid March, the event offers a coordinated opportunity for tulip growers around the world to connect with their suppliers — the exporters. Often the exporters started out as flower-bulb producers, three or four generations ago. As the market evolved, some producers began to specialize in bulb preparation and export. So it’s natural that they are clustered in Holland’s prime tulip-growing regions, west and north of Amsterdam.

At this year’s Tulip Trade Event, a dozen tulip-bulb exporters opened their doors to visitors. Each offered displays awash with colorful blooms. But make no mistake: It’s all about the bulbs.

An exporter may also cultivate tulip bulbs. But typically, exporters buy the bulbs from producers in Holland and elsewhere. Part of their function is to create a wide-ranging assortment that allows cut-flower growers to buy all the bulbs from one source.

Quality Control

Exporters do much more than buy and sell. When a batch of tulip bulbs is purchased, samples may be examined under a microscope to determine the stage of development, the earliest possible flowering date, and the necessary cooling treatment. At a later stage, bulbs are cleaned and graded for export.

At Jan de Wit en Zonen B.V. — one of the leading Dutch exporters — every bulb is X-rayed prior to export to check for disease. Samples of each shipment are kept behind, “to see the growing result at our own site,” said Jan de Wit, grandson of the company founder. “If our customer has any kind of problem, we can check if we have the same problem here. It’s a very important reference, and at the same time for us a good study to check the varieties and make improvements.”

A PERFECT PACKAGE Tulip bulbs hold the key to cut-flower quality.





Trust, But Inspect

Anyone who's watched a gorgeous flower die within days of receiving it knows how difficult it can be to predict performance in the vase — unless you have confidence in your suppliers. With tulip bulbs, reputation plays an even bigger role than usual. "We sell the bulbs, but the customer is not interested in the bulbs," said De Wit. "He's interested in the flower that he can grow out of the bulb, and that's different. What we sell is not a finished product; it's a half-product. That's why trust is a very big point in our business."

The quality of flower bulbs coming out of the Netherlands is regulated by FBIS, the Dutch Flower Bulb Inspection Service. Depending on the exporter's record, the service inspects 25 percent, 50 percent, or as much as 100 percent of bulbs exported — with a correlative increase in costs, since the inspection is required, but not free.

So, quality assurance adds a little to the cost of bulbs and, down the line, of tulips. Other special cost factors enter in,

related to the nature of the bulb. It takes between 20 and 25 years for breeders to create new varieties with tulips — much longer than with most other flowers. That's because, even though tulips reproduce most efficiently via division of the bulbs, breeding must be done with tulip seeds. Then, when a new variety looks promising, it takes many years of testing and bulb division to produce enough bulbs for that variety to go on the market.

A bad year for tulip bulbs (a late freeze, for example) can affect the supply, not just for that year, but for the following year as well. And for cut-flower growers, while tulips might shoot up quickly, it doesn't mean they are an easy crop. Flower farmers who grow tulips have to be on their game, because, as Hans Jong of Dutch exporter P. Aker points out, "A tulip doesn't need its flower to survive and reproduce. So if conditions are not perfect, the first thing it drops is the flower. That means, when you want a beautiful flower all the conditions should be good."

GO DEEPER

Get tips and advice on designing with tulips — including how to deal with "tulip droop"— and read about the history of "Tulip Mania" (a story made to share with your customers and staff) at safnow.org/moreonline.

In spite of all these challenges, the price of tulip bulbs has been stable for 50 years, thanks to Dutch innovation and initiative, according to Bonne Boots of exporter Boots Flowerbulbs B.V. Only in the last few years, he says, have prices risen slightly, because of an increase in demand and a temporary shortage in supply.

Naturally, costs for the bulb producers and preparers go up (energy, labor), but they have been able to keep prices low by realizing efficiencies in production. "When my father was growing tulip bulbs with his brothers, it was all mainly done by hand," said Boots. "They had 60 or 70 workers during the harvest, and they could do about one acre a day. Now they do it with just three or four people and they can do three acres in a day."

What's Your Tulip Type?

As beloved, traditional, and familiar as daisies, tulips may not be as trend-sensitive as some other flowers. Over the past 30 years or more, tulip production has scaled up to meet the demands of the mass market, where breeding and variety selection are often geared more to the needs of growers, shippers and traders than responsive to the whims of fashion.

Ask a Dutch exporter about trends in tulip varieties and they will mostly cite broad color preferences that vary by country. Japan loves pink; China loves red and gold, as in the popular variety 'World's Favorite.' Most European countries want a selection of standard, solid colors: white, red, yellow, pink, purple.

When it comes to form, "Dutch growers want tulips with the bud enclosed within the tips of the leaves," said Jong. "The leaves should be straight and not too wide." He's describing a tulip that lends itself to automated bunching and handling, which explains why this look is favored by growers and sellers. It's a look that is well accepted by Dutch consumers, said Jong — perhaps because, as tulip connoisseurs, they know that as the bud opens, the stem will continue to grow until the flower pokes above the leaves.

PRODUCT PREVIEW Every year in March, Dutch tulip-bulb producers and exporters meet with their customers: tulip growers from around the world — at the Tulip Trade Event (far left). They are there to buy and sell tulip bulbs — but it's the blooms that are on glorious display.



MONTE ORANGE; BOB FLOWERBULBS



APRICOT MAGIC; JAN DE WIT



DONATO; BOTFLOWERBULBS

Consumers in other markets prefer to buy tulips with bigger heads that already extend above the tips of the leaves at the time of sale. This is a feature that is partly a function of maturity, but also partly variety-specific.

The German growers want bulbs that will produce double tulips — accounting for as much as 70 percent of total sales in that country, says Jong. Along with bigger flower heads, however, the doubles are more likely to have wide, curling leaves. Both of these features pose problems for automated handling. However, the doubles are in demand with German consumers. Smaller producers can work more easily with such varieties because they do more things by hand.

And doubles are growing in popularity worldwide — particularly the large, rounded, fully double varieties called peony-flowering tulips. These can fetch a higher price as cut flowers, but the bulbs also must be large (and therefore more expensive), and they can be more difficult to grow, so the higher price is justified. The peony-flowering doubles are tulips sold more often in boutique flower shops than in the mass market.

Couture Care

Doubles aren't the only fancy tulips that are likely to cost more than standards; the same is true of parrots, fringed tulips, and other specialties. For producers, they may require special handling; in the shop and in the vase, however, these eye-catching flowers generally perform well, right along with their plainer sisters. Often a fringed or double tulip is a mutation of a standard tulip that carries with it the strength of the original. 'Cabanna', for example, with ruffled edges like a parrot tulip, is a variant of 'First Class', a reliable standard tulip with white petals tipped in vibrant pink. 'Polar Bear' is a pure white mutation of 'First Class'.



"DOUBLE TWIST"; BOTFLOWERBULBS

FINE AND FANCY Every floral retailer needs standard tulips in inventory. But fancies are the natural domain of full-service and boutique florists: doubles, including ball-shaped peony-flowering varieties, fringed or crisper and lily-flowering tulips, and feather-edged parrots.



WHITE LIBERSTAR; BOT FLOWERBULBS

While the exotic, specialty varieties are a florist's natural, exclusive domain, all types of tulips have a place in the flower-shop inventory — from parrots and peony-flowering doubles to the humble, oh-so-affordable pick-me-up bunch, tricked out with a florist touch like wired ribbon or a suitable vase. With their trademark foliage and satiny sheen, tulips can evoke the freshness of spring flowers all year long. 🌷

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While fringed tulips (also called *crispa*) are increasing on the market, the lily-flowering types are still rather few. They tend to have small flowers, according to Nico de Wit, one of the company directors at Jan de Wit en Zonen B.V. But the shape is distinctive! 'White Liberstar' is one of the most successful introductions.

Parrot tulips, with their extravagant stripes and scalloped, feather-edged petals, can vary in availability from one year to the next — another byproduct of the bulb market. Since parrots tend to flower late in the natural season, that means the bulbs also mature later than other tulip varieties. In a year when demand for bulbs is low, parrots are among the first to feel the brunt of lost sales.

Like a Fine Wine

Just as a vintner in California or Oregon seeks out terrain to mimic European climates, long-stemmed, so-called "French" tulips rely on the plentiful light of Mediterranean and other southern growing regions to reach their luxurious height. But the varieties must also be well suited to the special growing techniques used to produce these elegant beauties, with thick, strong stems and flower heads that are in proportion, yet not too heavy. In California, Sun Valley's Redwood Grove collection of long-stemmed tulips is aptly named for the tall trees that grow in the northern part of the state. The flowers, however, are cultivated in Sun Valley's southern California location.



SAMBUCA; BOT FLOWERBULBS