

The colourful history of Canada's biggest flower festival

ALL ABOUT

TULIPS

HOW THESE COLD-CLIMATE, ASEXUAL PROPAGATORS BECAME THE HOTTEST BUDS OF SPRINGTIME



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We all know tulips for their origins in Holland, but did you know the flower with flair really came from the Ottoman Empire of the 1500s?

Tulips floated around a corridor from Persia to the Mediterranean, and were first sent north to Europe as a gift from the Sultan of Turkey. They became highly prized in courtyards across Europe, known for their intense and exotic colours. Vivid as they were, those colours were still in stock reds, pinks, yellows and purples.



Parliament Hill is framed by a tulip garden in Gatineau, Quebec in 2011. (The Canadian Press/Sean Kilpatrick)

Soon there were more palettes to play with, as early horticulturists worked with hybrids to create even more intense colours, patterns and streaks on tulip petals: Parrot hybrids that have curly, twisted petals; Viridiflora hybrids with streaked colours on pale petals; Fringed hybrids with fraying edges. Lately there's been blending with other types to create sensations like Waterlily tulips. The list isn't quite endless, but after 400-plus years of tulip tinkering there are about 1,700 types of tulips today.



A Rembrandt tulip, named after the Dutch painter. (Photo by Ed / Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

It takes about 20 years to create a new species. They are asexual propagators, meaning they reproduce by producing small bulbs from the larger bulbs. Tulip bulbs themselves take seven to 12 years to mature, thus making them a valuable commodity – especially some of the new, rare varieties.

When tulip bulbs first arrived in Holland they became wildly popular. They are one of those rare plants that thrive in a region with cold winters when the bulb is underground, so it was a flower that had found its place.

Incredibly beautiful, they appealed to scientists, artists, and investors. Prices reached sky-high by 1637 – sometimes 10 times an average annual salary. They transformed from commodity to a type of currency, leading to gambling, speculation and what has been called the Dutch financial panic of ‘Tulipomania.’

Some bulbs changed hands 10 times a day at the height of the tulip bubble, but the economic impact when the bubble burst is believed to have been limited to a fairly small circle of bulb buyers and sellers.

Tulip bulbs are planted in the fall and bloom in the spring, from early April to late May. It’s still big business in the Netherlands, where they produce more than 4 billion bulbs each year.

Tulip time in the nation’s capital

Many of those are exports, and about 10,000 bulbs arrive each spring as a gift to the city of Ottawa.

In Canada’s capital, they’ve taken on a larger meaning – and have come to symbolize this country’s [deep bond with the Netherlands after the Second World War](#). Then-Queen Wilhelmina sent the original shipment of bulbs to Ottawa immediately after the Second World War.

This was her thanks for our nation’s role in liberating the Netherlands at the end of the war, and for hosting then-Princess Julianna and her daughters. They lived safely in the Rockcliffe neighbourhood of Ottawa for most of the war. Julianna resided at Stornaway and gave birth to Princess Margaret at a local hospital.



Tulips bloom on the front lawn of Parliament Hill in Ottawa in 2010. (The Canadian Press/Adrian Wyld)

Ottawa soon became famous for its brightly coloured tulips. The gifts of bulbs came every year, augmenting and expanding the displays through the city and Gatineau, to the point where the [Canadian Tulip Festival](#) can claim it offers the world's largest tulip display.

This year is the special 70th commemoration of the Liberation and the Tulip Legacy.

The festival lasts for three weeks in May – follow their [Twitter account](#) or check out the tips below to make the most of the springtime celebration.

5 cool things to see at The Canadian Tulip Festival, May 8 to 18:

- **Count and Shoot:** 100 varieties of tulips throughout the National Capital Region – see how many you can find and photograph. There are 3 million flowers to choose from.
- **Explore:** The [entire National Capital Region](#) becomes a sight to see at this time of year, but the big concentration of tulips can be seen at Dow's Lake, part of the Rideau Canal system.
- **Exercise:** You can bike along the canal and spend some time in the area, where there's an experimental farm and other signs of nature.
- **Music:** Live music at Commissioner's Park, and fireworks on May 8, 9, 15 and 16.
- **Enjoy:** Second World War re-enactors, buskers and vintage vehicles will make their presence known at various sites.

Other flower festivals to check out this year:

[Apple Blossom Festival](#) – May 27 to June 1, 2015 – Annapolis Valley, N.S.

[Waterton Wildflower Festival](#) – June 19 to 27, 2015 – Waterton, Alta.

[PEI Potato Blossom Festival](#) – July 13 to 19, 2015 – Prince Edward Island

[Alpine Blossom Festival](#) – July 31 to Aug. 2, 2015 – Tod Mountain, B.C.

Festivals to check out next year:

[Canada Blooms](#) – March 11 to 20, 2016 – Toronto, On.

[Vancouver Cherry Blossom Festival](#) – April 2016 – Vancouver, B.C.



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