



The flowers of diminutive *Tulipa saxatilis* (Bakeri Group) 'Lilac Wonder' open wide in sunshine

Terrific tulips!

It is the national flower of Holland, available in every conceivable colour except true blue. In the seventeenth century, a single bulb was worth as much as a Dutch town house; the tulip is simply one of the world's alluring and most recognisable flowers. **James Wickham** tiptoes through the tulip's rich history and picks out some of his favourites.

With all the natural elegance and poise of catwalk supermodels, tulips flirt their satiny head gear as spring gently nudges into early summer. The name tulip comes from the Turkish word for turban and gardeners have fallen under their spell since the first bulbs were introduced into western gardens over four hundred years ago. Initially prized by the Ottomans in their Turkish palaces, tulips found their way to Holland in the mid 16th century via Dutch merchants dealing in luxury items such as silks, spices and precious jewels. Within a few short decades, the tulip became the most esteemed and coveted flower among the wealthy classes.

Then something extraordinary happened, a few of these cherished bulbs suddenly and seemingly at will, started to produce stripy flowers, a phenomenon now known to be actually caused by a virus. Acquiring one of these new fancy tulips was seen as a status symbol for the nouveau riche and they changed hands between unwitting speculative buyers for vast amounts. At the height of this craze in the 1630s, a single bulb of the red and white striped 'Semper Augustus', changed hands for the

equivalent of a skilled worker's salary for ten years, or the price of one of Amsterdam's finest town houses. The term 'tulipomania' is given to this bizarre period of Dutch history and is an early example of a speculative economic bubble bursting. Thankfully today you can buy a packet of tulips for about the same price as a sandwich and flowers, as we know, feed the soul, if not the stomach.

I couldn't imagine a spring without tulips gracing my own garden. I grow them in large pots on the patio, single colours for extra punch and replace the bulbs each year. Some would deem it extravagant, but I find the display is never as good in subsequent years. The bulbs fare a bit better for longevity in the border, especially some of the stronger growing varieties such as the old cherry red 'Apeldoorn' or 'Spring Green', which has ivory-white flowers, striped with emerald green. I also have a group of 'Flaming Parrot' that has returned for several years, their exotically ruffled, red and yellow striped flowers bringing a wonderfully eccentric note behind a clump of waxy-leaved bergenia, still suffused with beetroot tones from the winter.