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hortus bulborum – conservors of historic bulb cultivars

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After the extraordinary scorching and early-flowering spring of 2011 where ~~most~~ of the tulips in my garden were over by April 20, I imagine that many of us would be all for some truly late flowering varieties.

This would help with a more reliable succession of spring flowers in our gardens, so why is it that modern breeders are so determined to get tulips flowering earlier and earlier? A few ~~really~~ really late ones, such as the parrot tulip 'Orange Favourite' would be a boon.

If you like spring-flowering bulbs and tulips in particular, a visit to Hortus Bulborum in the north of Holland is like visiting one of the best art galleries in the world.

If it hadn't been for Hortus Bulborum I would never have found the new love of my life – the Breeder group of tulips – which I'm now on a major quest to grow. They fell out of favour in the Twenties because they flower late, in May.

But to set the scene: at Hortus Bulborum there are over 4,000 spring bulbs, with 125 varieties of crocuses and hyacinths, an expanding collection of fritillaries, 1,200 narcissi and 2,650 different varieties of tulip all packed into 3.7 acres.

This collection includes some recent varieties, as well as botanical treasures such as the world's oldest cultivated tulip, the tiny, 'Duc van Tol Red and Yellow' from 1595, variegated crown imperials from the 1600s and narcissi grown by the Romans.

All are growing in neat blocks of one variety, many of which will only be planted here. Each spring the volunteer staff dead-head and dig up the bulbs after flowering. All are cleaned and labeled, with each variety packed into its own bag and crated for drying. They are all replanted in the autumn, with a straw mulch to protect them from frost damage.

That's the point of this place, a living, flowering bulb museum and completely unique in the world.

Breeder Tulips

There are tulips here which I know, but many more that I'd never seen and groups I'd never even heard of. The Breeder tulips, so-called because they were used to breed the more sought-after variegated types, come in extraordinarily beautiful colours — deep rich mahoganies, purples, crimsons, chestnuts, coppers and ochre yellows — and all have a smokiness to the overall look which makes them irresistibly stylish.

The deep rich brown tulip is no longer available, but surely it is due for a massive revival. The usual offering of sweetie reds, yellows, oranges, pinks and purples is all very well, but this sophisticated family of colours is like Designers Guild next to Ikea and I know which I'd choose, if I could.

The Breeder group was very popular in the early 20th century. There were 250 varieties registered in 1900 but, as they were not suitable for forcing and flowered late, they went out of fashion.

Today, none are commercially available but, for €70 (£61) a year, you can adopt your favourite to make sure it will be preserved. If more of us do this, it would make these wonderful things more secure. Growing plants is the best way to preserve them.



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I compiled a shortlist of three Breeder varieties I was keen to adopt. First, the brandy-snap coloured, multi-headed 'Copernicus'. This was vying with an incredible decadent dandy: the yellow striped with red 'Parkiet (Parrot) Markgraaf'.

Joop Zonneveld, the curator of Hortus Bulborum, also pointed out a particular tulip, one of the most beautiful, sultry and desirable flowers I've ever seen, 'General Ney'. This has the colour and shine of a wonderful old piece of furniture and a delicious sweet freesia-like scent.

I settled on 'General Ney' as my third adoptee.

Unique references to history

It's possible to spend several hours here ogling beautiful flowers, but it's in the Rembrandt patch where I imagine most people will decide to become tulip parents.

The markings on Rembrandt tulips are created by a virus. This infects the bulb, but these varieties in particular are strong enough to grow through the infection and continue to flower.

I picked out 'Columbine' as one of my favourites, a purple, the base colour lightly broken by a paler mauve. 'Royal Sovereign' was also extraordinary, its base colour not dissimilar to 'General Ney', more like a painting or swirly Murano Venetian glass than a flower, with gold spliced into the deep brown-red.

'Absalon' was also splendid, a pair of colours similar to 'Royal Sovereign' but more reliably striped. Zonneveld allowed us to pick one or two of each to photograph and it felt as though we were handling precious gems.

But more seriously, these small bulb fields safeguard a living reference collection and an irreplaceable bank of genetic material to be used by scientists and bulb breeders alike. Plan your visit now for next spring. Visit [their website for more information](#).

More about Hortus Bulborum

This is not where to go if you want to buy new varieties for your garden. You're better to visit a tulip exhibition field (such as Floratuin in Holland).

Hortus Bulborum shows varieties threatened with extinction; 90 per cent of tulips that are planted every year are no longer available.

The collection was begun 80 years ago by headmaster Pieter Boschman, who saw bulb varieties disappearing. He was worried that, as fashions changed, varieties would be lost.

He started Hortus as a way of showing the progress of the tulip breeding story from the simple species collected in the wild, through the 18 different groups which have been developed.

Joop Zonneveld is a retired bulb salesman, who along with eight other volunteers, runs Hortus without full-time staff.

It is not a commercial venture and despite bulb sponsorship and some grants, life can be precarious.

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