

## Six Tips for Planting Tulips



Tulips are brightly colored spring flowers that are popular around the world for being one of the first in a series of perennials that signal the end of winter each year. Like most flower garden additions, how you plant the blooms can make all the difference when it comes time for them to shine. Tulips are spring blooming geophytes that use bulbs as storage organs according to Edwin Visser, director of merchandising, Breck's Holland. "Tulips in the wild are found in a band stretching from Southern Europe to Central Asia."

They belong to the genus *Tulipa*, according to Chad Husby, Ph.D. and chief explorer at Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden, which includes about 75 species. "The large flowers and diversity of color have made them popular ornamentals for over 1,000 years since they were first introduced to cultivation in Persia."

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## Plant in Moderate Temperatures

Tulips prefer moderate temperatures: full sun in cooler climates where the sun provides additional warmth, and partial shade in hotter areas. "Tulip bulbs need a chilling period of about three months to re-bloom," according to Husby. "In cold climates (USDA hardiness zones four to seven), this can be done in the ground or in an outdoor storage area." In hotter climates (like USDA zones eight to 10), they should be refrigerated for three months before planting.

## Soil Drainage Is Key

"Tulips should be covered with at least eight inches of soil and need good drainage," Husby adds. They are sensitive to wet soil, and aside from real drought conditions, should not be watered artificially. "Excess water often causes rotting."

# Use Fertilizer to Give Tulips a Leg Up

While they don't require fertilizer, if you want to offer your blooms a boost Husby suggests doing it at the time of planting. "It is best to use a bulb formulation that is low in nitrogen," he says. "This helps them to build up reserves for the next season, though they already have what they need stored in their bulbs for the current blooming season."

## Buy "Dry" Bulbs

If you want to add some tulips to your yard, Visser says they're best grown from bulbs. "This is the most affordable and most exciting way," he says. "You can buy tulips in pots in the spring, but this is expensive, and you won't have the choice of varieties that suppliers of 'dry' bulbs offer in the fall."

After a few years, you may need to buy new bulbs, Visser adds, since some varieties will only flower for three to 10 years. If you decide to go ahead and buy an already flowering plant from your local nursery, Husby suggests putting it into a container instead of the ground, which could be too cold for the unestablished plant.

## Plant Them in the Fall

Tulips are very much loved by gardeners because they give a nice color display to a border before most perennials emerge; on the flipside, they go dormant relatively early to give space for your favorite perennials, says Holger Winenga, the horticulturist at LongHouse Reserve. To get the best results you should plant your tulip bulbs in the fall, so that they can bloom the following spring. "They drop their foliage in the summer and prefer to stay relatively dry during their dormancy," he says.