

The Archibald Archive – Genus Guides

TULIPA

Comprising about 100 species, *Tulipa* is distributed from Western Europe to the Himalaya or even to Japan, if you do not separate *Tulipa edulis* into *Amana*. This genus in Liliaceae includes some of the most spectacular of all bulbous plants. It is more than a little surprising that, like *Allium*, this genus is not at present fashionable with British bulb enthusiasts, who currently reserve most of their enthusiasm for little green fritillaries and wan crocuses. For the less prejudiced, *Tulipa* provides a rich source of spectacular beauty and interest. The complex variation and difficult taxonomy should appeal to the collector and many species are just as much a challenge to grow well as the most recalcitrant fritillaries. We have no doubt that their time will come. We repeat verbatim, our comments on the genus *Crocus*: as a few tulips are familiar garden plants in temperate areas, many gardeners assume all are easy to grow. Those listed cheaply as wild species in less specialized bulb catalogues are sometimes of hybrid origin or are clones, often untypical of the species as a whole and selected for mass production. If you want reliable, if short-lived, garden-plants, these are for you. For the specialist grower, we are attempting to build up basic fertile parent-stocks, raised from wild seed-collections where possible, as a source of hand-pollinated seeds.

Though the genus has a wide distribution, the range and diversity of species increases towards the East with the greatest concentration in Central Asia. Cultivation in Britain does not usually present many problems in a bulb-frame or in containers under glass but only one or two species, like *Tulipa sprengeri* and *T. sylvestris*, are reliably permanent plants for the open-garden. Many species are ideally suited to gardens in areas with extreme continental climates and dry summers. We have seen several species self-sowing freely in a Colorado garden. As with most allied genera, the species from extremely high altitudes or from very arid habitats are the most difficult to grow. The majority will appreciate a warm, dry rest in summer. Seeds should be sown from late summer to midwinter to provide the cold winter spell necessary for germination. Late sown seed may not germinate until after the following winter. The seedlings usually appear in early spring at the same time as the foliage of mature bulbs. Seedlings usually take a year or so longer to flower than many other bulbs and corms. If grown in pots, we recommend repotting the first year after germination as the young bulbs of many will be found to have descended to the base of the container, where it can become too wet when watering recommences the next season.

Nomenclature and Further information: This is not an 'easy' genus taxonomically and nomenclature is a bit of a problem. The modern treatments by western botanists in the standard floras tend to opt out by unjustifiable 'lumping'. Unusually for an account in 'The European Garden Flora', the 1986 treatment there by Vicky Mathews and Chris Grey-Wilson is one of the most useful for gardeners. The British account by

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A.D. Hall, 'The Genus Tulipa', was published in 1940 and is now somewhat outdated, as well as being a rather rare collector's volume. The more recent Russian account by Z.P. Botschantzeva, 'Tulipa', has been translated into English and was published in 1982 but it is now at least as rare as Hall's book. There is no reference book for gardeners which deals authoritatively with the species. For general reference, try 'The Bulb Book' by Martyn Rix and Roger Phillips, 'The Smaller Bulbs' by Brian Mathew (1987) and 'Growing Bulbs' by Martyn Rix (1983).

[Since this was written a useful volume 'Tulips: Species and Hybrids for the Gardener' by Richard Wilford, has been published. ISBN-10: 0881927635
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