

## THE WILD TULIPS

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While the sophisticated elegance of the tall, poker-backed Darwin and Cottage Tulips has its place in most gardens, it is to the wild Tulipa species that the rock gardener must look. Though many are dwarfer and more compact than their big, blasé cousins, several exceed anything the hybrids have to offer in the gorgeous opulence and brilliant colourings of their flowers. Yet, all the wild tulips have a certain aura of uncivilized abandon and those that put the hybrids to shame in the sumptuousness of their blooms are all the more savagely splendid because of it.

I shall not dwell on cultural matters. It is enough to say that many are very easily grown plants and that those, which are difficult, are indeed difficult. Although many grow naturally in heavy clays, the gardener cannot go wrong if he makes sure that they have the best drained position possible. If optimum drainage is essential, the maximum possible amount of sunshine is equally necessary. It is the distinct lack of these two commodities in our wet British winters and often in our cool, wet British summers that makes the difficult species what they are. No gardener in Britain and few in the United States need fear for the temperature - hardiness of most tulips. In fact, most would be happier if they could pass the winter frozen securely in the depths of the soil (and, tulips should be planted relatively deeply - five or six inches of soil is not too much over even the small-bulbed ones). The trouble arises when the winter is mild and damp. Then, if the sodden soil has not succeeded in rotting the bulb, the growth may appear prematurely, only



*Tulipa kaufmanniana*

/to be seared by the cold winds of spring. Should the winter be hard and so be merciful in allowing the bulbs to survive and flower, then we must hope that the summer will also be cruelly kind in roasting the tulip bulbs in a dry soil. Such ideal conditions are never attained in our temperate British climate and it is no small marvel that that the majority of Tulipa species react in such a carefree manner in the face of such apparently unsatisfactory conditions, for they are the children of the most extreme climatic conditions and this must never be forgotten in trying to grow them.

While no species is a truly high-growing alpine the majority frequent mountainous regions and several extend to a considerable altitude. The genus is centred on the Near and Middle East, extending its arms to encompass the Himalayas on one side and Europe and North Africa on the other. Many of the finest species in cultivation have come from the very heart of Asia, from the wild and desolate country which now lies within the borders of the Soviet Republics of Uzbek, Turkmen and Tadzhik. It is painful and frustrating for the plant-collector that such exciting lands, literally bursting with fine plants, should have been placed out of reach by mere political barriers but, fortunately, the homes of most Tulipa species are accessible and the numerous post-war expeditions to Turkey, Iraq and Iran have re-introduced several species and a number of new forms to add to the not inconsiderable number of tulips already in cultivation.

The remarkable variation within <sup>the</sup> Tulipa humilis complex, although it has long been apparent to botanists, has been demonstrated by the recent collections of Paul Furse and others. It is clear that the plants we know in our gardens as *T. pulchella*, *violacea*, *humilis* and so on are all but geographical variants of a single species and



*Tulipa lanata*

they are very ill-defined variants at that. They are all brilliant, dwarf plants with flowers of lilac, rose and mauve to deep crimson, claret, violet and purple, produced very early in the spring. They flower so early in fact that they are better assigned to the alpine-house or frame, where their precocious brightness can be enjoyed, immaculate and unsullied by the last storms of winter, along with such other earl-flowering bulbs as the dwarf Iris species of the Reticulata Section.

A number <sup>of</sup> close relatives of the *T. humilis* complex have developed into what are undeniably good and distinct species because of the geographical isolation of their habitats. Such a one is little *T. aucheriana* from Central Persia. In form it is not at all unlike some bulbs I have under the name of *T. pulchella humilis* but the leaves of *T. aucheriana* lie flat upon the ground and the shortest of stems carries one or two starry flowers of a distinct dusky pink. It is, in effect, an alpine development of the type and has a more Western counterpart in *T. lownei* from high in the mountains of the Lebanon. The latter is another charming dwarf with gold-centred stars of pallid pink and has recently returned to cultivation from the collections of Oleg Polunin. *T. cretica* is, I believe, close to it but this too has achieved distinguishing characteristics, isolated as it is in its island home, Crete. More distinct to the gardener's eye than any of these is a plant which came to me under the lengthy name of *T. pulchella alba coerulea oculata*. It is in fact a very fine form of *T. violacea* var. *pallida* but it is nevertheless, as its other name tells us, "the beautiful white tulip with a sky-blue eye", except that the eye is more of a deep, pure steely-blue, as is the pollen on the anthers.

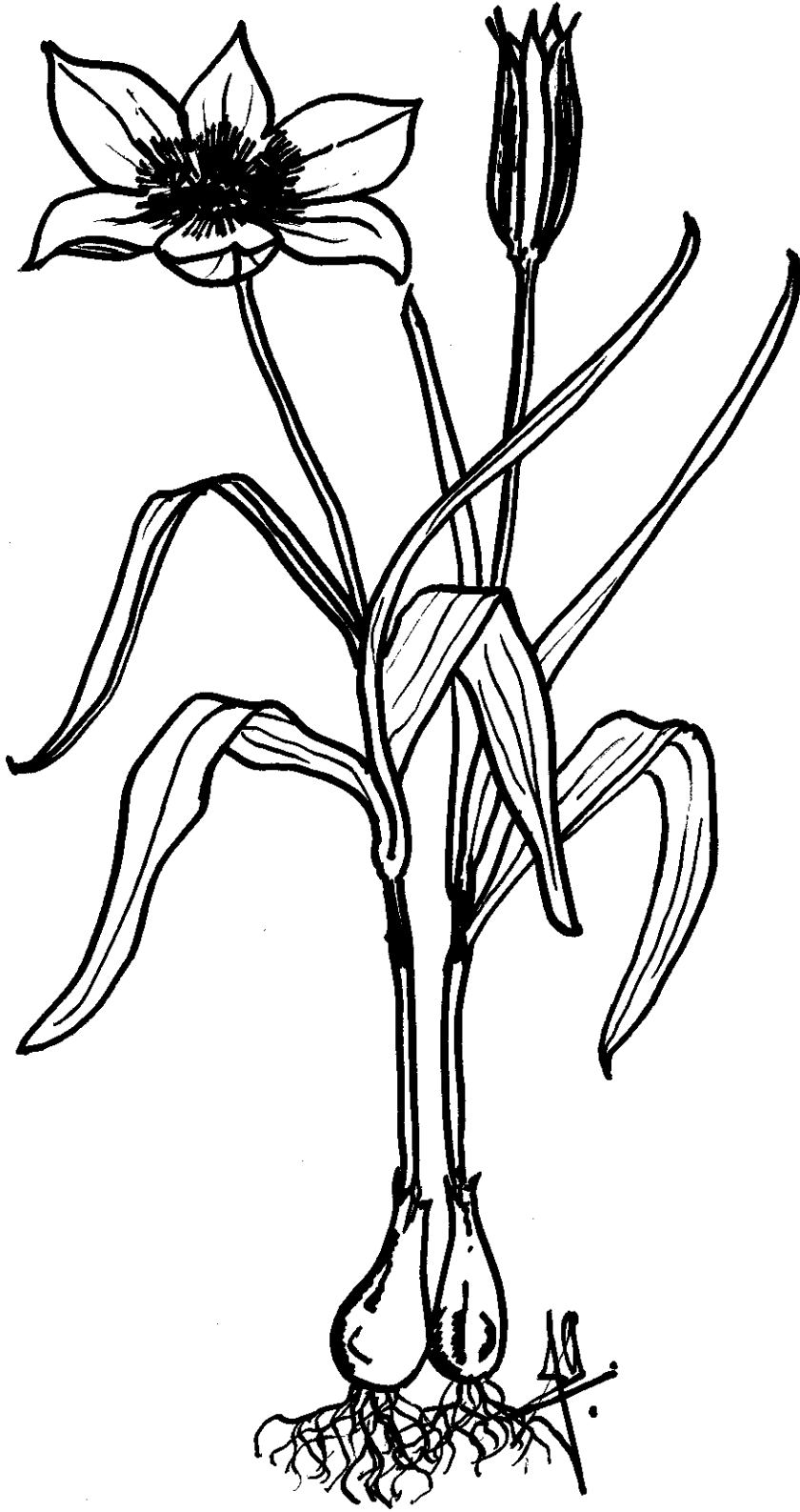


*Tulipa linifolia*

Two pleasant, if hardly spectacular Tulips from the Southern U.S.S.R., around the Caspian, are *T. biflora* and *T. turkestanica*. They amply compensate for their demureness by flowering and increasing with heart-warming freedom and every spring I delight in seeing the flowers of *T. turkestanica* opening with the first touch of the warm, spring sun. One moment I can easily pass by the mass of grey-green buds but at the next I am turning to enjoy a shower of white, orange-gold-centred stars, as the segments open to show their ivory interiors. I must confess to growing this species in preference to *T. biflora*, which is altogether the smaller and more dowdy of the two and has usually only three or four flowers to the six or seven of *T. turkestanica*, but if I could ~~but~~ grow every Tulipa species they would both surely be there.

*Tulipa tarda* belongs to the same section as these two but it is altogether a more showy plant. It is, in fact, one of the most garden-worthy members of the genus and can be relied upon <sup>to</sup> produce an increasing number of its lovely flowers each year. It grows no higher than six inches and each bulb produces several flowers, which open flat to pointed stars, white heavily suffused with yellow-green externally and shining lemon-gold, shading to white at the tips, within. It is a remarkably leafy tulip but none the worse for this as its strap-shaped foliage is of a bright and glistening green, a pleasure in itself as well as an unsurpassable setting for the yellow and white flowers. Many gardeners still persist in calling this species *T. dasystemon*, which name actually belongs to another plant which I have never seen in cultivation though I have a few supposed seedlings of it coming along from seed collected in the Tadzhik S.S.R.

Another dwarf Tulip with starry, yellow flowers but belonging to a different <sup>e</sup> section is *T. urumiensis*.



*Tulipa violacea* var. *pallida*



It only came from its home near the Daryacheh-i-Rizaiyeh (which we can call Lake Urmia for convenience) near the Persian-Turkish frontier in 1928 but it now seems to have settled down in cultivation and is generally available in Britain. Like *T. tarda* it flowers late, at about the end of April, but the flowers are fewer and smaller and of a lovely shade of rich, buttery yellow, tinged externally with olive-green or vinous purple. I am sure that we shall see much more of this plant in our gardens in the future.

Three closely related Tulips from Greece and neighbouring Turkey never fail to fascinate and delight me with their subtle and subdued tones. They are *T. hageri*, *T. whittallii* and *T. orphanidea*. *T. hageri* and *T. orphanidea* are both very variable and the issue is further confused by the existence of another species, *T. theophrastii* from the Aegean island of Mytilene, which I have never seen in cultivation. Anyhow, *T. hageri* seems to be the peg on which to hang the others. It is quite easily grown in the garden and the globular flowers are generally bronze or dull red internally and rather strikingly marked with bright-green outside. There are two named forms of this species, which I know of, in cultivation, though whether one can expect to obtain the same plants under these names every time I do not know. *T. h. splendens* has three or more copper-coloured flowers to each bulb and *T. h. nitens* is said to have flowers of orange-scarlet with a purple blotch within. With *T. whittallii* one can always be certain of obtaining the same plant because it is a tetraploid clone, propagated vegetatively. It is believed to have come from the neighbourhood of Izmir in Turkey but there is little information about its habitat and even its name has no botanical authority. It is presumably a tetraploid form of *T. hageri* and, as is to be expected, a distinct plant with larger flowers of a bright yet dusky orange and with a robust, vigorous constitution.