

[Previous Story](#) || [Headlines](#) || [Next Story](#)

Our Best Links

[What We Do](#) 

Keyword Search

[Advanced](#)

Garden Talk - Tulips carry a long history on those stalks

Tineke Wilders
North County Times

Pizza isn't Italian, French horns aren't French and the Dutch tulip isn't Dutch! Not Dutch? Absolutely not ---- the hybrid tulips we plant or put in vases today are descendants of Oriental beauties that once grew wild in Persia, Northern India, Afghanistan and especially Turkey.

The tulip as we know it became popular in Turkey during the 16th century, the time of Sultan Suleiman I and the Ottoman Empire. During this era, at the Sultan's wishes, the wild tulip was domesticated and cultivated for its symmetrical, cup shape and bold colors.

Constantinople in this period was reputed to be the most beautiful city in the world, as well as the crossroads of commerce, culture and political power. Part of its beauty came from the tulip, the

official flower of Suleiman's court. The Sultan had grand tulip gardens in Constantinople and at his summer home in Adrianople.

After Suleiman's death, the tulip continued to reign supreme among flowers in Turkey, reaching its apex during the rule of Ahmed III (1702-1730). During his rule, strict laws controlled tulip cultivation and trade, restricting their commerce to the capital. Violators were sent into exile. Because of these strict punishments, a French merchant named Fachat who sold tulips in Constantinople, said that in Turkey a tulip bulb was valued more than a human life!

This period in Turkish history became known as "the Age of the Tulip." During the annual tulip festival, guests were required to dress in clothes that harmonized with the flowers, and entertainment was provided by the Sultan's guard. On one evening of the festival, the ladies of the seraglio would present a charity bazaar ---- with the Sultan being their only customer.

Today, a tulip festival is held in Istanbul each year, but it is a tame relic of the past ---- there aren't even any tulips, let alone harems!

The Turks had a set of strict standards for tulips, which were judged by a committee of inspectors:

1. The flower had to be almond-shaped.
2. Each petal had to be pointed like a dagger.
3. All petals had to be smooth and firm.
4. Each flower had to have six petals, all identical in size.
5. All petals had to touch each other.
6. The three inner petals had to be narrower than the three outer ones.

7. The anthers and ovaries had to be hidden from sight.

8. The flower had to stand erect.

The first European to write about the Turkish flower was Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq, ambassador from Austria to the court of Suleiman the Magnificent. In 1554, he sent his friends enthusiastic accounts of "an

abundance of flowers everywhere ---- narcissus, hyacinths and those which the Turks call 'tulipam'."

Busbecq apparently mistook his interpreter's description of the flowers as resembling a turban for their name. His account continued: "The tulipam ... have little or no smell, but are admired for the beauty and variety of their colors. The Turks pay great attention to the cultivation of flowers and do not hesitate, although they are far from extravagant, to pay several aspers for one that is beautiful. I received

several presents of these flowers, which cost me not a little."

De Busbecq sent tulip bulbs and seeds to Europe as well as descriptions of their beauty. Soon specimen were growing in Vienna in the Imperial Gardens under the care of gardener Carolus Clusius. About the same time another shipment of these bulbs reached Germany, where botanist Conrad Gesner saw them and listed them officially in 1561 as *Tulipa turcarum*.

It was not until 1593 that the first tulips came to Holland. In that year, Clusius was appointed botany professor at the University of Leyden and brought his prized collection from Austria with him. The new flowers created quite a sensation in the country that was subsequently to become world-famous for growing and breeding tulips.

From Holland, the tulip spread to other parts of Europe, and Dutch settlers brought them overseas to the New World. In France, during the reign of Louis XIV (1638-1715), it became fashionable for ladies of the court to adorn themselves with tulips ---- they wore these blossoms in the deep décolletage of their stylish gowns, because they were the most exotic, expensive ornaments they could find.

Thus tulips went from decorations for Turkish harems to ornaments enhancing French women. The Dutch may take credit for the tulip's spread through Europe and North America and for the creation of many modern varieties, but it was the Turks who domesticated the wild flower and laid the groundwork for the Dutch.

The Holland bulb industry, which continues to hybridize new varieties, provides most of the world's tulips today. When you buy a bouquet of tulips during this holiday season, look closely at the flowers and think of their long history.

Tineke Wilders is a free-lance garden writer/broadcaster in North County.

12/21/01

[Previous Story](#) || [Headlines](#) || [Next Story](#)