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Tulip mania

Designer Kristy Ramage chooses three tulip combinations for borders that really pack a punch – delivering theatre, colour and beauty with aplomb to her Monmouthshire garden

WORDS KRISTY RAMAGE PHOTOGRAPHS BRITT WILLOUGHBY DYER

Rich flamboyance

Delicate species tulips are wonderful for peppering spring meadows and gracing restrained knot gardens, but in borders, surrounded by herbaceous perennials that are starting to race away, you can make bold use of the amazing, lustrous colours of cultivated tulips. In this spring performance, I favour a few characters from the circus mixed in with the elegance of classic players.

1 *Tulipa* 'Paul Scherer'

The darkest, inky maroon-black tulip, rivalling *T.* 'Queen of Night' (see next page). In my border, this Triumph tulip links perfectly with the colour of the copper beech tree beyond. Gives weight and scale to planting. 50cm. AGM*. RHS H6†. Late April to early May.

2 *T.* 'Columbine'

An exquisite and rare Rembrandt tulip, a 'broken' tulip of the type that was prized by the English florists' societies of the early 19th century. It opens to a wide cup, displaying black anthers inside. 50cm. Late April to May.

3 *T.* 'Verona'

An Early Double tulip with a soft, cupped double flower that is a creamy, pale-yellow flower colour, reminiscent of mayonnaise. It's lightly scented and gorgeous for picking. Just be aware that it's slightly short in stature. 35cm. Early to late April.

4 *T.* 'Marilyn'

This Lily-flowered tulip has a touch of flamboyance and is planted with *T.* 'Paul Scherer' in a tall pot next to the main border, where it flashes its fabulous rose flame without dominating the whole border. 50cm. Late April to early May.

5 *T.* 'Violet Beauty'

Growing in among the self-seeded aquilegia and *Geranium phaeum* 'Lily Lovell', this Single Late tulip provides an unusual and lively colour that lifts the darker tones of the blackcurrant flowers and leaf markings of the surrounding *Geranium phaeum* 'Samobor'. 60cm. Early to late May.

6 *T.* 'Blushing Girl'

Another Single Late tulip. This elegant cultivar changes colour over the season, starting with a pink edge to the petals over an ivory to primrose base, becoming more flushed with age. 60cm. Early to late May.





A surprise appearance

In the kitchen garden, tulips, rhubarb and artichokes mingle with currant bushes and a red cabbage that's gone rather stunningly to seed. The whole scene with a backdrop of pear blossom, is rather like a naïve painting, with the broad brush strokes of the giant leaves and the candy striped marvel that brings the tulip medley to life: *Tulipa* 'Carnaval de Nice'.

1 T. 'Blackjack'

An early flowering, dark plum-coloured Triumph tulip whose role will be taken by T. 'Queen of Night' (see below) later in the season. Both of these tulips have the ability to 'anchor' an otherwise slightly frothy combination of bulbs. 55cm. Early to late April.

2 T. 'Double Dazzle'

I have to admit that there is a lack of elegance about some double tulips, but the glorious depth of colour in this Early Double is its redeeming feature. It is particularly lovely when combined with glaucous leaves. 45cm. Early to late April.

3 T. 'Gabriella'

A wonderful sugary, pale-pink Triumph tulip that lightens to the edge of the petals. It looks as though it's catching the light, even on a dull day. Flowering here among the chives. 45cm. Early to late April.

4 *Narcissus* 'Thalia'

I wouldn't be without N. 'Thalia' somewhere in a garden. The form and colour of this dwarf trumpet daffodil is so good it's impossible not to be charmed. Introduced in 1916, it has been deservedly popular ever since for inter-planting with other bulbs or planting in drifts in a woodland. 30cm. Early to late April.

5 T. 'Carnaval de Nice'

The complexity of this Double Late's flower, combined with the red striations is utterly beguiling but needs careful placing. The artichoke leaves have the scale and subtle colouring to frame it like a painting. 50cm. AGM. RHS H6. Early May.

6 T. 'Queen of Night'

This Single Late tulip is so well known it needs no introduction. It is extremely popular, and justifiably so. Mix it with the double form T. 'Black Hero' for a spectacular late-season display. 60cm.





Softly spoken

With such a bold flower as the tulip, it's often the case that a restrained palette of colour works best. With the fresh emerging chartreuse-green leaves of the box, a simple combination of bulbs and early spring flowers in creamy white and soft apricot pinks is fresh and airy.

1 T. 'Mount Tacoma'

Especially beautiful in plump bud, where the slight green flush on the white looks more pronounced. The mass of petals gives this Double Late tulip the opulence of double peonies, and it's wonderful for cutting for the house. 45cm. Late April to early May.

2 T. 'Apricot Beauty'

Named in 1953, this lightly scented, softest salmon-rose tulip is vintage in more ways than one – imagine silk lingerie from the 1920s and you have this Single Early tulip to a tee. 45cm. AGM. RHS H6. Early to late April.

3 T. 'Menton'

Like a super athlete, this Single Late is a bold and lustrous tulip, very tall and bursting with health. It's an iridescent pink with an exotic shimmer of salmon, and orange. 65cm. AGM. RHS H6. Early to late May.

4 T. 'La Belle Époque'

A different vibe to the classic tulip shapes with their saturated hues, it is a colour-shifting blend of apricot-pink and coffee that ages beautifully. Double Late. 45cm. Late April to early May.



Tips for combining and planting spring bulbs

Knowing what mood you want to convey with any planting is a great starting point for choosing the plants. I find writing down some words to describe what I want to achieve really helps to distil ideas. Is this garden formal or naive? Do I want flamboyance or restraint? Do I want the border to be calm or energetic? With those thoughts in place, you'll find narrowing down the choice of bulbs is much easier.

Look at form as well as colour. If you decide that you want restrained elegance, look for taller, finer shapes (lily-flowered tulips, for instance). If it's about bohemian opulence, include some sumptuous parrot tulips. If the feel is soft and romantic, indulge in some full-blown doubles with their mass of petals.

Beds of tulips on their own can look spectacular, but I prefer to grow them more sparsely in combination with perennials, where the emerging leaves and a few early flowers are a foil for the shapely heads of the tulips. I grow them through mounds of soft foliage of aquilegias, polemoniums, thalictrums and geraniums and the ferny copper coloured foliage of *Anthriscus sylvestris* 'Ravenswing', which tones with the dark tulips and sets off the light tulips beautifully.

WHERE TO BUY

• Crocus

Tel 01344 578111, crocus.co.uk

A well-chosen selection of bulbs with beautiful photos – helpful when designing combinations.

• Jacques Amand International

Tel 020 8420 7110, jacquesamandintl.com

A great selection, including true Rembrandt tulips, which are hard to find elsewhere.

• Nijssen Bulbs

Tel +31 (0)23 528 08 16, nijssenbulbs.nl

A wonderful selection of rare bulbs and historic tulips. Catalogue is a great source of inspiration.

• Peter Nyssen

Tel 0161 747 4000, peternyssen.com

A fantastic source for a variety of bulbs and plants. An organised website and helpful staff.