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# Wild Tulips

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## **Wild Tulips (*Tulipa turkestanica*, *biflora fosterina*, *tarda*, *sylvestris*, etc)**

Lynne Holland, Community Education Assistant UMaine Cooperative Extension

Some of the most intriguing flowers in my early spring garden are the “wild” Turkish tulips. These tulips, readily available through regular flower bulb sources are what some believe to be the original tulips of Central Asia. By the time “Tulipmania” swept Holland in the 1630’s the hybrid tulips were already the dominant players. When most people think of tulips they think of those hybrid, towering giants found in gardens today. The “wild” tulips I am referring to are reliably perennial, short, fragrant, self-sowing, ground hugging plants with bicolor foliage. It is from these that Turkish hybridizers started hundreds of years before Tulipmania. They are so easy to grow it’s tempting to try them all!

Wild Turkish tulips have been recorded as early as the 1590’s in central Asia. *Tulipa turkestanica* and its cousins are multi-flowering, botanical tulips generally with yellow and white star shaped flowers. Today, modern breeders have introduced other colors. They are usually short (under 7”) blooming in March and April depending on the zone. Because these are native to Turkestan, they are very hardy little bulbs with some varieties reliably blooming in zone 3. They are very easy to grow; doing well in tight spots or large drifts. They prefer full sun, but will bloom in partial shade. They like well-drained, relatively fertile soils with moderate moisture. Plants will slowly colonize with the new plants looking like grass so watch when you weed around existing plants. Like other spring flowering bulbs, wild species tulips should be planted in the fall. The bulbs are small and relatively inexpensive so planting drifts of them will be easy on the wallet.

The history of tulips reads like a Dan Brown Novel. It has intrigue, deception, broken hearts and fallen fortunes and just a touch of insanity. If you want to know more about Tulipmania see <http://www.hortus-bulborum.nl/about-the-tulip/tulipmania>. But these species tulips continue to intrigue. Even in modern times there have been expeditions to record species tulips in their natural habitat-you can take an interactive journey at this site: <http://www.tulipsinthewild.com/>. The wild tulips we buy today are all cultivated stock not wild collected. The species tulip has been around since the beginning of this centuries long tulip saga and continues to intrigue passersby of my little urban perennial border every spring. Photo credit: Colorblends.com

