

IN BRIEF

What A garden of interconnecting spaces with formal areas, kitchen garden, woodland walk, Japanese stroll garden and meadow.

Where Worcestershire.

Size Eight acres (including three acres of meadowland).

Soil Heavy clay.

Climate Temperate. 250m above sea level with moderate rainfall.

Hardiness zone USDA 8.

Drama queens

Tulips are the curtain-raisers at Morton Hall in Worcestershire, where visitors can enjoy a late-spring spectacle of formal, intricate plantings in a series of interconnected spaces

WORDS PAULA McWATERS PHOTOGRAPHS CLIVE NICHOLS

In the South Garden, Anne orchestrates a pastel scheme of pink, purple and white tulips – ‘Amazing Grace’, ‘Alibi’, ‘Havran’ and ‘White Triumphator’ – while *T. Formosa*, a *Viridiflora* tulip, adds lemony zest. The pear trees are *Pyrus nivalis* ‘Catalia’.

Anne Olivieri is a perfectionist. When you have 7,500 tulips to plant and are expecting some 4,500 visitors to come and see them over the early May Bank Holiday weekend, nothing can be left to chance. Anne and her husband René host the annual Morton Hall Tulip Festival in the grounds of their Georgian home in Worcestershire. Sponsored by Bloms Bulbs, it is a fundraiser for the Royal Shakespeare Company and it has to be show-stopping.

Anne orchestrates the immaculate colour scheme, with harmonious pastel shades of whites, pinks and purples in the South Garden and hotter, jazzier colours in the Kitchen Garden. “There’s a sunrise bed on the east wall with pinks and yellows, and more vibrant sunset shades of terracotta, red and yellow on the west wall,” she says. “The secret of getting each blend to gel is to drop in a Viridiflora such as *T. ‘Spring Green’* or ‘Formosa’ to enliven the pastel scheme, and to let rip in the Kitchen Garden with a bold carnival of colour.”

Short tulips go at the front and taller ones to the middle of the beds, and Anne uses different shapes, adding in peony-flowered and multi-headed tulips for impact and lily-flowered ones for elegance. She plots everything out on paper, and places each bulb on the earth herself to ensure the flowing, naturalistic effect she favours.

Work starts in summer when Anne and head gardener Oli Johnson select which tulips to plant. “Over the past six years the season has become noticeably earlier, so we now rely entirely on late cultivars, which cuts out 80 per cent of the tulips on the market,” explains Anne. Cultivars come in and out of stock too, so although Anne has favourites she needs to stay on the look-out for substitutes. She and Oli also overplant and edit out any that fail or go over before the festival starts.

Improving the heavy clay soil is vital. Oli mulches the beds annually with finely composted bark to help with drainage. “The bulbs aren’t planted very deeply, as we lift them straight after flowering,” Anne says. “They never sit in wet clay.” The scale of the planting makes it impossible to dry and reuse the bulbs, and she believes the danger of introducing disease is high. As a result, all the tulip bulbs are composted and the ▶

To continue turn to page 36



The bronze top of an elegant white sandstone fountain in the South Garden doubles as a birdbath. Tulips ‘Florijn Chic’, ‘Havran’, ‘Blue Diamond’, ‘Candy Club’ and ‘Paul Scherer’ flourish here.



Box balls, roses, osmanthus and *Choisya x dewitteana* ‘Aztec Pearl’ provide permanent planting, along with camassias, *Nepeta* and clematis. Tulips here include ‘Maureen’, ‘Dreamland’ and ‘White Triumphator’.



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Hot colours predominate in the Kitchen Garden, with *T. ‘Ballerina’*, ‘Red Signal’ and ‘Fiery Club’. A yellow rose, *Rosa ‘Alister Stella Gray’* scrambles through crab apple *Malus x zumi ‘Golden Hornet’*.

ANNE'S 12 KEY TULIPS

1 Tulipa 'Rhapsody of Smiles' This sturdy, extra-tall, long-flowering single late has huge impact due to its unusually variable blend of yellow and yellow flushed with red. Flowers May. Height and spread: 60cm x 15cm.

2 T. 'Florijn Chic' An elegant lily-flowered specimen with delicious-looking, creamy-white and primrose-yellow colouring and markedly pointed petals. April – May. 45cm x 10cm.

3 T. 'Antoinette' This multi-headed single late turns from yellow to pink as it ages. Great value in the border as it can have two to three flowers to a stem. A good companion for pale-pink 'Amazing Grace'. April – May. 50cm x 10cm.

4 T. 'Dordogne' The colour of a fiery sunset, this single late is a beauty. Tall and perfectly shaped, it makes a great contribution to a hot colour scheme. May. 60cm x 15cm. AGM*.

5 T. 'Amazing Grace' The fulsome, double, peony-shaped flowers offer good value as they hold onto their petals, which open a lavender-pink and gradually darken to a richer pink. April – May. 35-50cm x 15cm.

6 T. 'Black Hero' This peony-flowered late is packed with dark maroon-black petals with a satin sheen. Tall, sturdy and good for cutting. April – May. 60cm x 10cm.

7 T. 'White Triumphator' Popular, pure-white, lily-flowered tulip whose pointed, recurved petals give it its distinctively elegant appearance. Great in pots, it is also good for cutting. April – May. 55cm x 10cm. AGM*.

8 T. 'Alibi' A relatively new Triumph tulip with lilac pink-purple single flowers. Sturdy, reliable and compact, it works well front of border or in pots. April – May. 40cm x 10cm.

9 T. 'Slawa' Crimson-red flowers with an orange/pink margin. A hybrid of 'Gavota'. Adds punch to a hot colour scheme; good in pots and for cutting. April – May. 35-45cm x 10cm.

10 T. 'Fly Away' Exotic and showy lily-flowered blooms with sharply pointed petals in flame-like orange-red, edged with gold. Good in pots and for cutting. April – May. 50-70cm x 10cm.

11 T. 'Purple Elegance' This multi-headed cultivar can have three to five flowers per stem. Striking purple colouring, feathering to lilac with a white edge. April – May. 50cm x 10cm.

12 T. 'Affaire' This classic Triumph tulip has vanilla-white flowers enlivened by a striking, violet-raspberry ripple effect to the petal edges. April – May. 40cm x 10cm.

*Holds an Award of Garden Merit from the Royal Horticultural Society.

Most tulips have a hardiness rating of RHS H6, USDA 3a-8b.



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TOP TIPS FOR A TULIP DISPLAY

Plan out your design on paper and take pains to plant in natural drifts rather than blocks.

Add a Viridiflora, such as *T. 'Spring Green'* or *T. 'Formosa'*, to add some zest to pastel schemes.

Use a mix of different shapes, such as peony-flowered and multi-headed tulips for impact, and lily-flowered ones for elegance.

Source big bulbs. Choose ones that are size 12 or bigger.

Leave space for tulips in between your permanent planting of perennials, and replace the bulbs with hardy annuals in summer.

Improve your soil's drainage with regular applications of mulch. Bulbs hate heavy, waterlogged clay.

Plant your bulbs as late as you can and take them out again after flowering, to help avoid fungal disease such as tulip fire.

Protect tulips from squirrel attack by scattering chilli powder on the soil after planting. Reapply after rain.

▷ resulting compost is never brought back into the formal areas.

Anne and René embarked on a major remodelling of the garden when they bought Morton Hall in 2007. With the help of expert garden designer Charles Chesshire, the garden was designed as a hybrid between the 18th-century concept of open landscape and the more elaborate Arts and Crafts style. The result is a series of distinct areas, each leading harmoniously to the next. At the front of the property, the view is over meadowland, which is studded first with fritillaries and narcissi, then camassias at tulip time. "Paths are mown through the grass and we have planted an informal allée of Japanese cherry, *Prunus* 'Fragrant Cloud', with lovely white blossom that fades to pink." A monopteros (a circular sandstone colonnade) creates a focal point.

From the meadow, a nut walk leads to a tea house and semi-formal woodland gardens. In the charmingly atmospheric Japanese Stroll Garden, paths wind around a series of ponds with stepping stones and planted banks. In spring, the scene is illuminated by the fresh greens of emerging foliage, along with pulmonarias, camassias and early thalictrums. The cool, blue-and-white colour scheme here contrasts with the more formal tulip gardens.

The South Garden, where the pastel tulips take centre stage, is reached via a wisteria-covered pergola. Space to slot in the bulbs each year is always left between the permanent structural planting, such as clipped box, choisya, and pairs of ornamental silver pears, plus roses, peonies and herbaceous perennials. Once the tulips have been lifted, they are replaced with annuals such as echiums, *Nicotiana*, cosmos and zinnias for colour and interest right through until October. In the Kitchen Garden, the 'hot' tulips are backed up by the emerging foliage of heucheras, geums and the early *Iris* 'Maui Moonlight' and, for summer colour, the bulbs are replaced with tender salvias.

In the face of wetter and earlier springs, the challenges of mounting such a display as this are ever-growing, but Anne and Oli remain undaunted. For now at least, the show must go on. □

USEFUL INFORMATION

Address Morton Hall Lane, Redditch, Worcestershire B96 6SJ. **Tel** 01386 791820. **Web** mortonhallgardens.co.uk
Open Tulip Festival takes place 3-5 May. Pre-booked tickets, £15. Gardens open for groups by appointment April – September, and for NGS on 23 August.

The secret of getting each blend to gel is to drop in a viridiflora to enliven the pastel scheme, and to let rip in the Kitchen Garden with a bold carnival of colour

Bulbs are slotted into pockets left in the South Garden beds and tulips such as 'Amazing Grace', 'Purple Elegance', 'Havran', 'Paul Scherer' and 'Maureen', come up among the emerging foliage of *Thalictrum aquilegifolium*, nepetas, stachys, scabious and *Salvia yangii*.