

GREATEST SHOW

Morton Hall's synchronised tulip display is exceptional – the brilliance of thousands of blooms heightened by months of meticulous planning and planting by owner Anne Olivieri

WORDS JACKY HOBBS PHOTOGRAPHS CLIVE NICHOLS

In the South Garden, the arrangement of tulips is heightened by a verdant backdrop of new spring foliage and expanse of lawn. Clean-clipped trees afford geometry and height in contrast to the softness of the border



The ornamental planting style of the South Garden flows into the adjoining Kitchen Garden, either side of the dividing brick wall. A few prize, versatile tulips like *Tulipa* 'Amazing Grace' also make the transition, joining the sun-inspired, hotter-hued heads next door

Ever since the heady days of tulip mania in 17th-century Holland, the blooms have maintained an uncanny allure. 'They have not lost their power over people,' explains Anne Olivieri, whose vibrant and intricate 6,000-strong display draws visitors to the annual Tulip Festival held in the gardens of her Worcestershire home, Morton Hall.

Almost 15 years ago, with the help of garden designer Charles Chesshire, Anne began the process of transforming the eight acres of parkland into seven diverse, but connected, seasonal gardens. 'When my husband René and I viewed the property, in spring 2007, the parkland and meadow were awash with naturalised fritillaria and narcissi,' says Anne. She introduced snowdrops, scilla and camassias to intensify the display and extend the season. Clouds of Japanese flowering cherries complemented the delicate planting, softening the skyline of majestic estate trees. South of the curving driveway, secreted by trees, lie two new gardens. A Japanese Stroll Garden, planted with flowering cherries, magnolias and tree peonies, incorporates reflective pools and a teahouse. Beyond lies the Rockery, its immense stone stairway clad with woodland vegetation.

There is year-round interest in these naturalistic spaces, but come late spring the emphasis shifts to the more overtly designed formal gardens. The Tulip Festival is a show of extravagant colour, pattern and form, designed to kick-start this new momentum.

The geometry of South Garden is softened by lush green borders, sprung with box spheres, and ringed with willow supporting emerging peonies and roses. Tulips flood and fill in the gaps, weaving in and out of the perennial shrubs, right down to the lower fountain terrace. The effect is artistic and the planting plan itself resembles an impressionist painting. Anne explains the intricate design process. 'Coordinates

of the garden's permanent plantings are recorded on a map. I overlay this with a matrix involving over 4,000 tulips, using 15 different cultivars. A different symbol denotes their colour, height and form.'

In the adjoining Kitchen Garden, ahead of the edibles, the perimeter beds and grouped terracotta pots burst with colour. They follow the path of the sun; a spectacular fusion of sunrise colours flushes the eastern beds, pitted against a striking bonfire of sunset flames in the west. 'The arrangements are simpler than the South Garden's matrix, 1,500 bulbs with fewer varieties, but colour intensity compensates for reduced density. Impact is enhanced by front-planting with 'stout, big-headed, peony-flowered tulips 'Uncle Tom' and 'Amazing Grace' and the multi-headed 'Antoinette'. Tulips are systematically arranged in classical height order, 'short to the front, taller to the back, with subtle mingling of changeover heights creating movement and avoiding awkward, soldier-like rows'. The planting is meticulously orchestrated, but in the past the effect has been 'ruined by substitute or rogue bulbs'. A partnership with Bloms Bulbs resolved such issues and, in 2019, led to the first annual Tulip Festival. Anne plans the gardens while Bloms provide an assortment of 'weird and wonderful' tulips for the cutting-garden, and bring armfuls of cut-blooms to display in the Orangery. 'It's so important to see tulips in the flesh,' enthuses Anne, delighted to share her finely-tuned kaleidoscope of glorious colour with visitors. 🌷

■ Tulip Festival 1-3 May 2021. Pre-booked tickets only via mortonhallgardens.co.uk and rsc.org.uk/morton-hall (please check Morton Hall Gardens website for any Covid-19 updates). Open for group visits by prior arrangement from April to late September. NGS open day 28 August 2021. Admission proceeds donated to RSC costume design.



RECREATE THE LOOK

Here's how to achieve Anne's Sunrise tulip border (shown above) in your own garden

- (Bulb quantity per 1.5x 2.5m rectangle)
- 15 pink, peony-flowered 'Amazing Grace' (height 38cm)
- 15 multi-headed yellow-maturing-pink 'Antoinette' (height 50cm)
- 15 late double 'Black Hero' (height 60cm)
- 15 single late orange 'Avignon' (height 70cm)

- In a sunny border, create ample space for tulips to flow in-between existing perennials and herbaceous plants. Set out and repeat bulbs in their planting positions, in loosely grouped drifts of 5-6. Intermingle a few bulbs where heights transition, avoid straight lines and isolated groups.
- Using a trowel, plant 5cm deep, and cover, working from back to front, planting tall to short. Shallow planting eases lifting later. Dust finished planting area with hot chilli powder, 2 tablespoons per m2, an effective squirrel deterrent not harmful to birds. Reapply as necessary, until shoots appear. Mulch with wood bark or compost, to improve drainage.
- Post flowering, lift and compost all tulips. Large, healthy and fresh bulbs produce the best blooms.

“TULIPS ARE VERSATILE AND SCALABLE, ANYONE CAN GROW THEM - IN POTS OR PARKLANDS, TOWN OR COUNTRY, BUT DENSITY IS KEY”



The lower fountain terrace is a focal point designed to draw you through the South Garden. The bronze fountain's cascade has been finely tuned to create a veil of beaded droplets rather than amorphous lapping falls



Anne plants a mass of unusual snow-white, crystalline fringed tulips, Tulipa 'Signature' in a stone planter in the West Garden



The pathway sweeps through concentrated borders that are planted with pink, lemon, white and black tulips



In the Kitchen Garden, terracotta pots are planted with a single tulip type then grouped together to create a border effect



“WHAT I LOVE MOST ABOUT GARDENING IS THAT IT ALLOWS ME TO PAINT WITH FLOWERS. AN ART WHICH I STRIVE TO PERFECT”

The ancient bulb meadow is filled with myriad bulbs. The spectacle begins in February, peaks in April with narcissi and fritillaria, while crocuses and camassias carry it right into May

GARDEN GUIDE

ORIENTATION The formal gardens face south, but the overall open aspect and size of the estate ensure most spaces enjoy good light.

SOIL TYPE Heavy clay, regularly mulched to improve drainage.

SPECIAL FEATURES Tulip Festival 1-3 May 2021, informal spring bulb meadow and parkland, Japanese Stroll Garden, Rockery, formal Fountain Garden, walled Kitchen Garden, Mediterranean Garden.

GARDEN DESIGN Charles Chesshire (charlescheshire.co.uk, 07967 127877) original framework further developed by owner Anne Olivieri and former head gardener Harry Green

View across the South Garden where evergreen box balls, *Buxus sempervirens*, roll towards fresh-foliaged pyramidal ornamental silver pear trees, *Pyrus elaeagnifolia* 'Silver Sails'. Behind the arbour is clothed in *Clematis koreana* 'Broughton Bride', planted to flower simultaneously with the tulips that are budding below



PLANT PROFILE

Favourite festival tulips from Morton Hall Gardens

1. **Best for catching the eye** 'Huis Ten Bosch', which despite its delicate appearance is hardy and long-lasting.
2. **Best lily-flowered** A real classic, 'Ballerina' is one of the closest to the original tulips that came out of Persia.
3. **Best for creating contrast** 'Flaming Spring Green' is good for borders or pots, in full sun or part shade.
4. **Best for colour-changing** 'Slawa' becomes coppery orange before its edges fade to silvery-white with maturity.
5. **Best white** Peony-flowered 'Mount Tacoma' opens into full swansdown-white blooms on sturdy stems.
6. **Best for height** At 60cm and intensifying colour as it ages, 'Sauternes' is a standout in the mid/back border.
7. **Best for fullness** 'Blue Diamond' is ideal for the front of the border and makes an excellent cut flower.
8. **Best black** One of the darkest, glossiest blacks available is bold, late, single tulip 'Café Noir'
9. **Best for bi-colour pattern** 'Banja Luka' is reminiscent of the flamed specimens of 17th-century tulip mania.