

Precision Planning

At Morton Hall in Worcestershire, Anne Olivieri and her team plant thousands of bulbs each autumn for the popular Tulip Festival with meticulous care. She shares her techniques for creating gorgeous displays

PHOTOGRAPHS CLIVE NICHOLS

With carefully perfected displays, Morton Hall's Tulip Festival showcases the best of these bulbs.



Anne Olivieri has always planted tulips at Morton Hall – provision was made for their inclusion in the borders here by designer Charles Chesshire in the original plans for the garden. But it wasn't until 2019 that this Worcestershire garden opened for its first Tulip Festival.

Unlikely as it sounds, the festival came about as a result of Anne's frustration with the quality and consistency of the bulbs she had been buying. A true perfectionist, she plans her tulip displays with precision, carefully selecting colours and flower shapes. Having often experienced suppliers sending bulbs that flowered in an unexpected colour, or cultivars she'd specified being substituted, she wrote to the only supplier she had consistently found sent her just what she'd asked for, Bloms Bulbs. "I spend ages thinking about varieties and I'm obsessed with colours, so it really irritated me!" she announces.

"Once our tulips have finished flowering, they come out and are composted so it's expensive for a one-off display. I wrote Bloms a letter explaining that we take great pride in our tulip planting and needed to work with somebody absolutely reliable, hoping they might give us a good rate. In the end they came back and asked whether we would like to hold a tulip festival with them.



Above The South Garden enjoys a restrained colour palette of pastel pinks and purples. **Below** 'Amazing Parrot' – pink and orange in the best possible way.

I thought that was quite an honour since there are only three or four other gardens in the UK where they do that – and it meant we would have access to first-rate tulips."

The garden's regular open days already raise money for nearby Stratford-upon-Avon's Royal Shakespeare Company and its Stitch in Time campaign (it was actually the theatre that drew Anne and her husband to this area when they bought the house in 2007). Anne decided that the RSC should benefit from the money raised through ticket sales to the Tulip Festival too; in return, the RSC handle ticket sales for it through their website and help promote the festival.

"It's a triple win: the RSC get the money from admissions; Bloms have a showcase here, and they stage a really nice cut flower exhibition in the orangery, so they can talk to people and take orders; and we plant the tulips we want in our borders. Bloms don't dictate at all which tulips we're getting. They know I'm really particular!"

So far, so good, but how do Anne and her head gardener Harry Green plan and plant the 5,000-strong bulb display under the pressure of knowing some 3,000 people will be turning up to see it? It's apparently a combination of design, precision planning and clever cultivar choice.



Left A mixture of 'Spring Green', 'Blue Diamond' and 'Sapporo' tulips demonstrates the way Anne laces tulips through the border.

Middle, from left Multi-headed tulip 'Night Club'; 'Flaming Spring Green'.

Bottom Anne's plan for just one of her borders, each symbol representing six tulip bulbs of one variety.



1 Plan for tulips in your design

Charles Chesshire, who designed the gardens at Morton Hall for Anne back in 2007, factored tulip displays into the borders he planned for her. "Charles is very keen on gardens having high impact," says Anne. "In between the perennial planting in his beds he leaves gaps that can be full of tulips. We use only late-flowering tulips so it lights up with a bang in May, and then when they get taken out, they are replaced with annuals for lots more colour until the autumn." It's a high-maintenance and intensive style of gardening, not for the faint-hearted, but for impact and wow-factor, it is hard to beat.

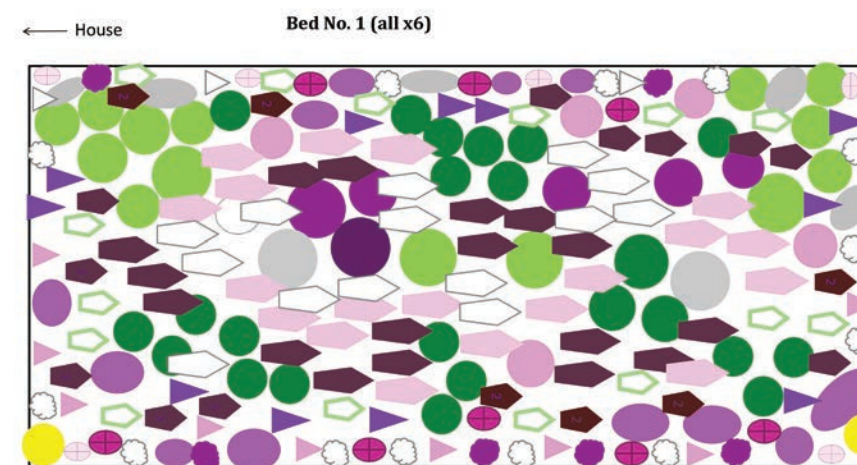
2 Perfect the colour scheme

The different gardens at Morton Hall are carefully colour themed. The formally laid-out South Garden concentrates on romantic, pastel shades, while the adjoining kitchen garden features warmer tones in borders that are based on the colours of the rising and setting sun. "I wanted the tulips to be in these colour schemes, so I've been trialling many, many different varieties over the years to see what fits the bill," says Anne.

3 Plan with military precision

In order to keep track of all the tulip cultivars she was growing and trying, Anne developed a map to record all of the varieties and precisely where they are planted. "It's a very defined planting plan that gives us the possibility of wandering around in May and seeing what is looking good or not so we can improve on the plan every year. Trying to remember which tulips are planted where is impossible," she adds.

The plan is a work of art in itself – a diagram of the borders with each group of six bulbs represented by a coloured symbol that reflects the flower shape of the tulip. Anne prefers to distribute her tulips in





a lace-like pattern among the permanent planting, rather than in more solid blocks of colour, so the resulting map more closely resembles a swatch of Liberty fabric than a traditional planting plan.

“We plant the tulips the way you plant a border: lower growing varieties on the outside, higher ones on the inside. I spend ages doing the map and thinking about the varieties every year, so I know I need a 60cm tall really perfect pink tulip, for example.” Choosing only from the late-flowering group of tulips ensures they all flower at the same time, for one big hit of colour at Tulip Festival time.

Top In the Kitchen Garden, the colours are hotter: maroon tulip ‘Uncle Tom’ mixes with geums and heuchera, while ‘Flaming Spring Green’ adds contrast.

Above right Lily-flowered tulip ‘Ballerina’.

Above left ‘Lasting Love’ is a glossy deep crimson.

Mixing their shapes – peony-flowered varieties with goblet shapes and pointier lily-flowered types for example – makes the scheme come alive.

4 Prepare the beds before planting

Work begins in autumn to get the borders ready for the big Tulip Planting Day, which is normally in mid-November. The week before, the borders are cleared of all spent annuals, weeds and leaves, and herbaceous plants are cut back. Any tree and shrub pruning that’s required is carried out and the soil lightly forked over in readiness for planting. To ensure a first-class display, Anne plants new bulbs every year. Once they’ve faded, the old tulips head to the compost heap where they are quickly turned into a soil-improving mulch that’s spread every autumn. “They help the next generation,” says Anne.

5 Foil tulip-hungry squirrels

It’s a big job, but Anne has found the best way to deter squirrels from helping themselves to the tulip bulbs is to complete their planting in one day, so they are all safely in the ground at once. “I place every single one of the bulbs following the plan – every one of the symbols is six tulips of each kind. There are about 4,500 between the South Garden and the Kitchen Garden and another 600 in the Cutting Garden where we put the weird and wonderful tulips,” she says. Once the bulbs have gone in, the areas where they’ve been planted are



given a liberal dose of hot chilli powder. “We buy about ten kilos of it every year, and when it rains you have to re-do it, but it works. It deters the squirrels and it also works on voles, but it doesn’t interfere with the birds at all.” Anne’s noticed that squirrels appear to work in groups. “If one squirrel comes and takes a tulip, all of its mates will follow,” she says. “You just have to break that habit.”

6 Pick the best cultivars

There are some tulips, says Anne, that she has to grow every year. “I have to have ‘Mount Tacoma’ and I love black tulips, so we always have ‘Black Hero’, ‘Queen of Night’ or ‘Paul Scherer’. I also like the ‘Club’ series of multi-headed tulips.” With four to five flowers per stem, cream and pink ‘Candy Club’ and darker purple ‘Night Club’ reliably attract the attention of Tulip Festival visitors. “Importantly, we always break the colour scheme with a different colour that’s not in the mix, to make it more interesting, and we usually use ‘Spring Green’ for that,” says Anne.

She finds lily-flowered types the most delicate in inclement weather, and peony-flowered ones surprisingly tough: after a hot spell over Easter, last year’s Tulip Festival was preceded by a day of

Above Designer Charles Chesshire’s technique of creating pockets for seasonal planting among shrubs and perennials can be seen in this South Garden border.

Top right Dark tulips are a must-have for Anne; this is ‘Café Noir’.

Above right Tulip ‘Blue Diamond’ ages well for a longer period of interest.

heavy rain and hail, and Anne was amazed by how many tulips pulled through. Others, such as ‘Blue Diamond’, age well. “They don’t fall apart; they change colour and ‘ripen’, in a way,” she explains.

7 Find the right partners

Tulips need the right plants around them to enhance their colours and set off the blooms. “Camassias are a good choice because they add a colour that isn’t part of the tulip repertoire, but the acid, lime-green of the perennials’ young growth also sets them off like a canvas, as does the foliage of the roses when it comes out, the clematis coming through, the new growth on the box balls in between – all the greens are there as a backdrop,” says Anne. On the walls, spring-flowering clematis such as *C. alpina* and *C. montana* provide a veil of flowers that doesn’t interfere with the tulip display, while a 200-year-old horse chestnut is covered in its gorgeous white candelabras. ■

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This year’s Tulip Festival takes place on 2-4 May 2020 at Morton Hall, Morton Hall Lane, Redditch B96 6SJ. Open 10am-4pm, tickets £10 per person in support of costume-making at the RSC. Tel: 01789 331111 or visit rsc.org.uk to book tickets.