

How do we get new tulip variations?

This week's #TulipFact: One of the best features of tulips is their incredible variety. Look anywhere you can buy tulips to plant and you will be treated to dozens of unique colors, shapes, and sizes--all beautiful in their own right. What you will not see is the work behind every breed: each one can require decades of time and effort before being mature and robust enough to be shared with the world.

Every variation of tulips sold today was started when genetic material from different flowers combined to create a new, unique seed. Breeders in Holland and around the world will pick particular flowers to attempt to mix or cross them in the hope of creating new variations.



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Then breeders take the freshly formed seeds, and this is where the long, patient adventure truly begins. After being planted in soil, a flower does not appear from the seed right away. Instead, the plant produces only leaves--capturing the Sun's energy and using it to grow and strengthen the bulb below. The bulb is the part of the plant underground that has roots at one end and a stem growing from the other end. The bulb continues to grow and produce only leaves for not one, not two, but for seven years before it makes a flower. Seven years during which a breeder does not yet know what the final flower even looks like.

Once a new flower emerges, healthy and robust, the work continues! A decision is made on whether the flower will appeal to the tulip lovers of the world--Is it something that, among the countless varieties already sold today, will stand out and be desired? This is not a decision to be taken lightly, and the vast majority of new variations will be turned down. Why? Because it can take approximately fifteen years of hard work to take a single flower and get it to a point of having enough tulip plants to sell.

The problem of getting more flowers sounds relatively simple--we have one flower we like, so now we need more. To do this, growers focus on bulb offshoots. Bulb offshoots are smaller bulbs that grow from the side of the original tulip bulb underground and can be separated from the main bulb and planted to grow into a separate flowering plant. In this way, growers can be assured of getting the same flower and appearance as the original bulb. If they relied on seeds, they would likely get a mixture of different flower variations.



It may take fifteen years, but the power of multiplication can turn the single flower into thousands of identical flowering plants. The first bulb generates 3-4 offshoots each season, which then mature and each generate 3-4 more offshoots, which then mature and do the same. Eventually, with thousands of flower bulbs available, the tulip variety will be ready for sale. Mature bulbs are sold to wholesalers and retailers, who then pass them on to consumers for use in gardens.

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