

Painting with petals

Designer Arabella Lennox-Boyd shares the secrets behind the colourful shows of spring tulips she creates in the borders of her home Gresgarth Hall in Lancashire

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Arabella Lennox-Boyd is a leading garden designer and the winner of six Chelsea Gold Medals.

Though I try to plan tulips and other bulbs in August, the garden here at Gresgarth seems to distract me with its daily surprises and challenges and, suddenly, I find that autumn is upon me and the bulb order is still on my desk, unfinished.

Indulging in different tulip combinations each year at Gresgarth is a treat. I adore all the tulip types, particularly species, but have found that the early flowering ones and the species, too, suffer in this climate, preferring the drier conditions of their native countries. I choose mainly Triumph and Darwin hybrids in basic colour schemes, because the flowering times are just right for this garden, and then I follow this scheme on each side of the house's main terrace and shrub borders.

My most experimental schemes are planted in a series of pots outside my studio and, if these are lovely, they become candidates for the terraces the following year. In the borders I tend to plant single colours but, in my yellow herbaceous border, I have started playing around with brown, orange and red tulips.

I love to combine and interplant tulips with other reliable spring things. In pots, the forget-me-not *Myosotis sylvatica* in blue or white do very well for me in chilly, wet Lancashire, as do the small-flowered winter pansies. In my big borders, I go mad with colour, planting tulips among the early euphorbias, such as the dramatically dark-leaved *Euphorbia Blackbird* (= 'Nothowlee') and chartreuse-flowered *E. x martinii*, and even the plum-leaved cow parsley, *Ambrosicus sylvestris* 'Ravenswing'. The flowers and leaves

of all these plants make fabulous foils and give volume to my beds when the tulips disappear.

I remove my tulips each year as I feel the show is never as strong in subsequent springs. Sometimes one's least favourite tulip – in my case a bright-red one with a dark centre – comes up every year, however, and looks just dreadful among the paler colours of the emerging herbaceous plants, but I can't bring myself to remove it. I am lucky to have never had a problem with tulip fire. I order only top-size bulbs from good suppliers and plant them about 20cm deep. Sometimes my bulbs are removed for me, annoyingly early, by mice and water rats. I've learned to cover susceptible pots with a discreet cover of fine, wire mesh, which one hardly notices and, in the beds, I take a chance. This year the mice and rats seem to have had a bonanza and I doubt I shall have any tulips left in the shrub borders at all.

Combining tulip colours is a delight and I take inspiration from many places. Catalogues are like sweet shops and the Dutch still lifes make the historic Rembrandt varieties look ravishing, but it is from Nature herself that I take the most inspiration. While the pictures on the following pages show the fun I have in borders and pots, I adore nothing more than a simple, informal group of *Tulipa* 'Helmar' beneath a fragrant *Rhododendron luteum*, for example. Or *Tulipa sylvestris* drifting under a large *Magnolia demulata*. The ability of tulips to be subtle or a statement is perhaps the greatest luxury they afford.

• Turn the page for four of Arabella's sumptuous tulip combinations for borders and containers.

*Holds an award of garden merit from the Royal Horticultural Society. Hardiness ratings given where available.

In late summer, this border at Gresgarth Hall, Arabella's home in Lancashire, is full of yellow and orange-flowered perennials. In April, she has introduced tulips to create a spring show. The colours are normally repeated for both containers and borders.

Blaze of colour

This combination is a selection of colours that intrigued me. Some are bright and some are subtle, but they all share the yellow-and-orange colour theme of this border. These early-to-mid-season cultivars are at their best before the foliage of the permanent herbaceous plants gain height and volume.

1 Tulipa 'Gavota'

An exotic, yellow-banded, deep-mahogany Triumph tulip. Wonderful with the lime-green flowers of *Euphorbia x martini*. 40cm. AGM*. RHS H6. USDA 3a-9b*. April.

2 T. 'Abu Hassan'

A Triumph tulip in deep terracotta-red, subtly edged with gold. Useful to drift among the pale-yellow and apricot tulips. 45cm. USDA 3a-8b. April – May.

3 T. 'Hollandia'

Huge, glowing red, cup-shaped flowers that seem to change hue with the light. A favourite for its colour and scale. 45cm. USDA 3a-7b. April – May.

4 T. 'Ronaldo'

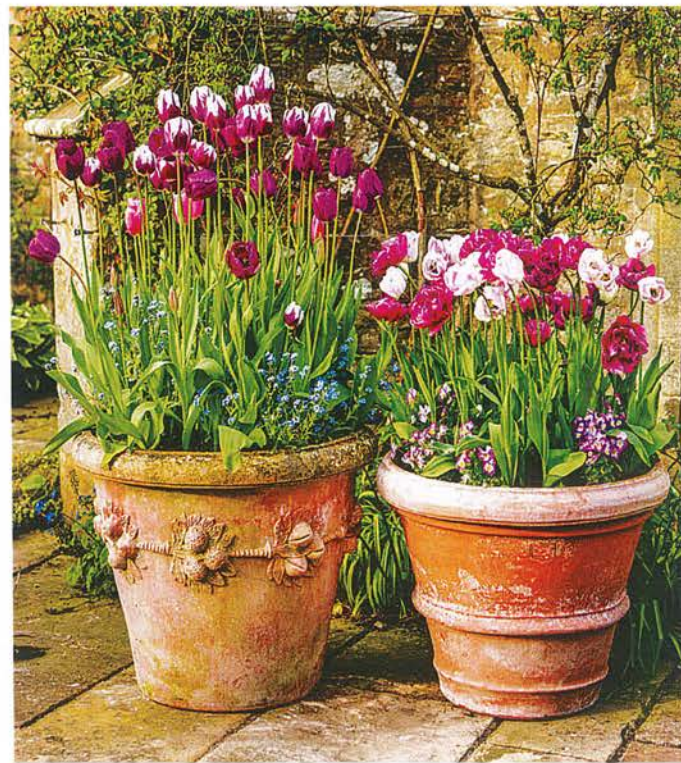
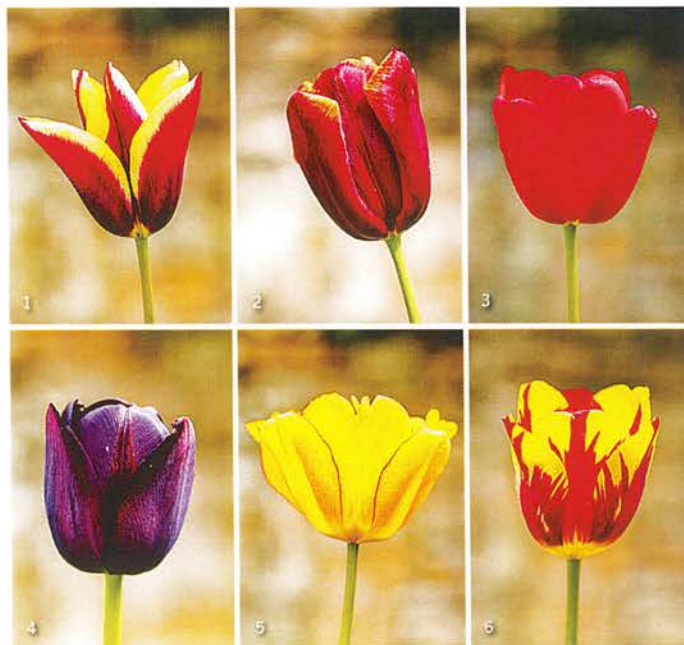
Rich, deep maroon-purple Triumph tulip with a metallic lustre on the outer petals. A good dark colour for adding visual depth to the combination. 40cm. USDA 4a-8b. April – May.

5 T. 'Blushing Apeldoorn'

Tall, Chinese yellow, subtly edged with orange, Darwin Hybrid. This cultivar was new to me, but I will certainly be using it again. 56cm. USDA 3a-8b. Mid April.

6 T. 'Helmar'

A dramatic yellow bloom, flamed with dark red, as wonderful in combinations as it is on its own, often stealing the show. 55cm. USDA 3a-7b. May.



Calm and collected

The variation on a colour theme of ivory, raspberry and pink in these pots makes a restful scene, while allowing the single and double flower textures to come to the fore. The pots' details continue this contrast as does the scale of the small-faced, pink winter pansies and blue forget-me-nots.

1 T. 'Zurel'

See following page.

2 T. 'Purple Flag'

Beautiful, burgundy-purple, full to almost double, this Triumph tulip, is especially good in pots where its detail can be admired. 45cm. USDA 3a-8b. April – May.

3 T. 'Rosalie'

Delicate, pink splashed with darker pink on the outer petals. Quite simply, a good pink. 50cm. USDA 3a-8b. Late April.

4 T. 'Jan Reus'

Deep burgundy-red and elegantly tall. Particularly good with pale colours. 50cm. USDA 3a-7b. April – May.

How to combine colours with panache

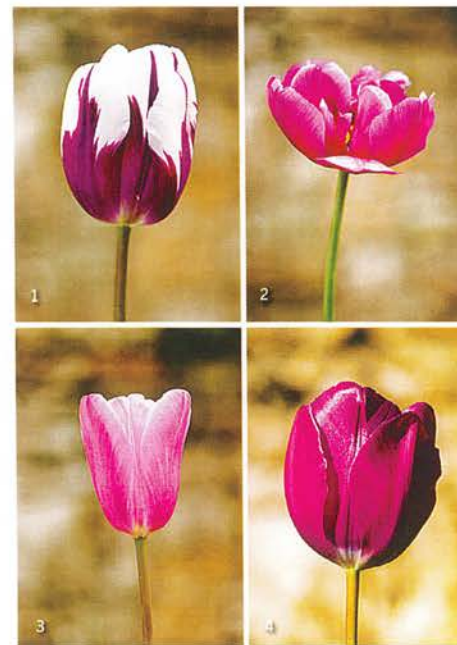
I am not a slave to colour combinations, especially with tulips, but I have found that certain rules often seem to apply. Orange tulips are not my first choice, but when planted with dark, burgundy ones, and drifted through paler buff- and tawny-coloured varieties, the combination looks wonderfully exotic and luxurious.

When planting tulips in borders, it is best to take inspiration from the surrounding herbaceous plants and shrubs. This year, next to the white-flowering *Rhododendron x mucronatum* I planted the scented T. 'Brown Sugar' among the unfolding leaves of ferns, herbaceous peonies, variegated hostas and early *Euphorbia x*

martini. Similarly, a swathe of pink T. 'Mistress' planted through Barnhaven primroses looks lovely when combined with the blossom of espalier- or goblet-trained apples.

In large pots, be generous with tulips and plant as many as you can in layers. Flamed or streaked tulips add a lovely detail to groups of solid-coloured tulips or mixed with daffodils. T. 'Exotic Emperor' with *Narcissus 'Thalia'* is a successful combination, while T. 'Peppermintstick', with its glistening white petals, deep pink on the outside, is a real delight in smaller pots.

Finally, when planting in borders, if in doubt, plant informally and in bold drifts to avoid the 'bitty' look.



Not entirely sure what is meant by the pots continue the contrast

Originally Tulipa 'Blueberry Ripple'

Tulipa clusiana 'Peppermint Stick'

Raspberry ripple

A mélange of plum, purple, pink and ivory tulips. The slight variation among flower heights gives depth to this combination, as do the dark blooms, visually receding into the background, while their lighter partners seem to float, in this picture, on a choppy sea of green.



1 T. 'Zurel'

The purple-marbled-ivory petals of this Triumph tulip, also known as T. Blueberry Ripple, give an historic quality to this scheme. 50cm. USDA 3a-8b. April – May.

2 T. 'Peerless Pink'

A bloom of soft, satiny pink with darker splashes that combines well with the darker and paler tulips in this combination. 40cm. USDA 3a-7b. Late April.

3 T. 'Paul Scherer'

Rounded and ruffled petals in deep cassis, this single, late tulip appears slightly earlier than T. 'Queen of Night'. A good, dark Triumph tulip without being sombre. 45cm. AGM. RHS H6, USDA 3a-8b. April – May.

4 T. 'Shirley'

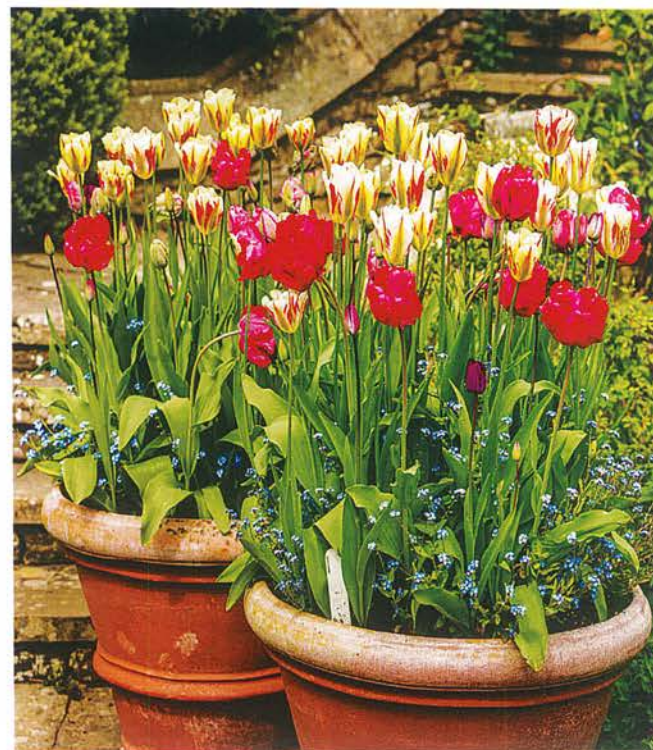
Delightful and charming, subtle white with a mauvy-pink picotee edge. I love the flower shape and its bluey-black basal centre. 55cm. USDA 3a-7b. Mid May.

5 T. 'Greuze'

Sturdy, dark stems support luscious purple blooms with an ember glow in the right light. A perfect bridge between T. 'Zurel' and T. 'Paul Scherer'. 55cm. USDA 3a-9a. May.

6 T. 'Clearwater'

A pristine, tall white bloom with a classic shape. Brings light to the combination and chimes with the ivory tips of T. 'Zurel'. 60cm. USDA 4a-8b. April – May.



Strawberry cream

The Viridiflora Group tulips, such as T. 'Flaming Springgreen', gives a freshness to any scheme by virtue of its green flare. The creamy petals give sparkle to the grey stone background and their upright form offers a striking difference to the parrot-feathered petals of T. 'Maywonder'. Forget-me-nots add delicacy.

1 T. 'Maywonder'

Double, late, peony-flowered type, the colour of rich, bright pink taffeta, that brings pep to subtle combinations. 40cm. USDA 4a-8b. May.

2 T. 'Flaming Springgreen'

A red-streaked sport of the classic T. 'Spring Green', blending effortlessly with cool and warm colour combinations. 45cm. USDA 3a-9b. May.

Tulipa 'Flaming Spring Green'



Where to buy

Avon Bulbs

Burnt House Farm, Mid Lambrook, South Petherton Somerset TA13 5HE. Tel 01460 242177. avonbulbs.co.uk
A many-times Chelsea-Gold-Medal-winning supplier of excellent tulip series, including rare ones.

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Sarah Raven

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