



TULI, TULI, TULI, TULI ... TULIPAN!

Dear Friends, we are now truly in Springtime, a season that regales us with many beautiful flowers. It's not easy to keep pace with Nature, because of the fast-growing vegetation, usually aided by a lovely mixture of rainy and sunny days with mild temperatures that stimulate and re-circulate the vital fluids of our beloved plants. The regional weather centre predicts a classic April, with some rainy days and temperatures within seasonal averages. So let's get organized, to keep up with all this growth. To use an automotive metaphor, I suggest we move into fourth gear. For those who haven't yet done so, it's time to begin cutting the grass, following the rules we've already learned. After this, a fertilizer rich in azote should be applied to our lawn, the backdrop for our beautiful garden. A slow-acting fertilizer should also be applied to ornamental plants, so the plants can nourish themselves over time.

The flowering tulips will colour our flowerbeds throughout the month and even beyond. Hopefully there won't be too much rain, otherwise this will quickly destroy the blossoms.

The tulip originated in Turkey and was imported to Europe in the mid-1500's, especially Holland, where techniques were developed to create many new varieties with diverse shapes and colours. The attraction to this flower was so great that it went beyond its role of ornamental beauty. The tulip acquired economic value and was the subject and cause of the first stock market crash.

Our present interest is in cultivating this beautiful flower. We note that some varieties may grow to over a half metre in height. The bulbs should be planted in the fall, to a depth of about 15 cm, depending on the variety. The ones that grow taller should be planted more deeply and the shorter ones planted nearer the surface, in light, organic and (most importantly) well-drained soil.

Tulips suffer greatly from standing water, and also from wind, which if too strong can push them over or break their stems. For this reason we try to plant them in sheltered areas. They usually don't require much maintenance. Break off dry leaves (usually in May and June), cut off stems that are without blossoms, apply a fertilizer adapted to bulbs, and if possible remove bulbs suffering from excessive humidity from the flowerbeds. Preserve the bulbs in a dry place, so they can be planted again next fall.

Let's not forget our other plants. With the period of late freeze behind us, we can re-position plants from our greenhouses back into their usual positions, assuring that they are healthy and taking care to fertilize them. Since we didn't have a cold winter, we should also check for insects, above all the annoying leaf-miner on our citrus plants, and possibly apply a phytopharmacological treatment if the sweetly perfumed citrus blossoms are not already present on the

plants. We should also check our roses for attacks by oidium and aphids, our *Buxus* (box plants) for defoliation by the *Lepidopterus *Cydalima perspectalis**, and our cypresses for aphids (*Cinara cypressi*), which have been assaulting them in recent years.

Besides maintenance, we take time this season to improve or enlarge our gardens, by substituting or planting new ornamental plants. The procedure is always the same: considering the plant's characteristics (exposition, size, type of soil, etc.), we make a hole bigger than the root ball or plant vase and put compost mixed with organic fertilizer in the bottom. We use the same mixture to cover the hole after we've settled the plant into it, being careful not to make it too deep or too shallow. If planting a tree, we should arrange some stakes around it (generally three stakes at 120 degrees around the tree). Sometimes it's enough to put just one stake next to the trunk, well down in the soil. These stakes will tutor and support the tree in its first years of life, until the root system develops enough for the tree to support itself on its own. We use tubular elastic to attach the stakes, so they can adapt to the expansion of the trunk. We may also arrange a piece of bale or jute between the trunk and the stakes in order to reduce chafing by the two surfaces in contact.

After planting, what do we do with our left-over materials (the plastic plant vase and packaging)? As we know, for some years now separation of refuse has been carried out in our country (other European countries are much more advanced). But a good method, even if it is in fact older, is that of recycling. A few days ago I found myself in the garden of my good friend Andrew. Wondering how to dispose of, or recycle, the material left from planting? Look what he invented.

Using the Styrofoam, small vases and plastic wrap as drainage materials, he positioned the black plastic vase containing the plant within a large amphora. Then he planted little *Dipladenia* (*Mandevilla*) plants within the amphora. When these grow they will hide the ugly black border of the plastic container. Not bad for a beginner!

Happy gardening to all!

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