

# THE GREAT WAVE

Hundreds upon thousands of tulips in jewel tones wash over the Leicestershire garden of Robin and Sally Bowie, delighting owners, designer and visitors alike

WORDS **JAMES ALEXANDER-SINCLAIR**  
PHOTOGRAPHS **MARIANNE MAJERUS**

**L**ET US, FOR THE SAKE OF ARGUMENT, THINK OF winter as a big heavy coat. Maybe it is made of slightly itchy herringbone tweed: whatever the fabric, it is something a bit steampunk or Sherlock Holmes-y. When we get to this time of year it is becoming cumbersome and the time has come to shrug it off and enjoy something lighter and more colourful. Enough greys and beiges: no more black-branched trees, for we have had our fill of dreary days and freezing nights.

What we all need right now are plants with jewelled colours and joyful demeanours and, I think you will agree, nothing fulfils that particular brief as well as tulips. There is little point in a single tulip: they are a plant that thrives on abundance. Plant not in tens but in hundreds, for they are relatively cheap and simple to grow. Give us seas of amethyst, orange, pearlescent white and shrimp pink crashing like breakers through our borders, for this is the very best way to carry us into a glorious summer. This is a garden that is awash with tulips: many thousands are planted every year not just for the pleasure of the garden owners, but also for the benefit of various local charities, which are also invited to the party.

I have been working with Robin and Sally Bowie in their garden in Leicestershire for over a decade. It is always more fun when a job goes on for years, as we have time to change our minds as time goes on and circumstances change. An interesting thing about designing gardens for people is when to walk away and say “There you go: my work here is done – it is your garden now.”

I am quite bad at that and like to pop back to see what is going on. Nowadays I go up there a few times a year when Sally and I drink coffee and wander round

**Left** Purple ‘Negrita’, maroon ‘Abu Hassan’ and pink ‘Holland Chic’ tulips, with clipped yew balls and zingy lime euphorbia flowers.





**Top** A blend of 'China Pink', 'Pink Diamond' and 'Menton' tulips emerge from mounds of geranium foliage. **Above** Sally Bowie, the garden's owner.

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the garden tweaking plantings and dreaming up new projects. In the past year or so her mind has been preoccupied by a neglected bog garden at the end of the plot and, a few years ago, we planted an arboretum in the field next door.

At the beginning, neither of those projects were on the agenda. I first visited Sally and Robin on a damp March day in 2007. The garden was quite gloomy with some large overgrown evergreens blocking off the road and a couple of trees that were well past their sell-by date. A big sweeping lawn housed

swollen hedges, a quietly rotting summerhouse under which a number of foxes happily frolicked, and there was a tired rockery made from concrete boulders. On the plus side, there was a magnificent avenue of limes, a whopping wisteria, some great steps, a good structure of walls and terraces and plenty of potential. Good bones, in other words, so much of the work that needed doing was in the planting rather than in building expensive hard landscaping.

It needed life, colour and a jolly good shake up to make it work for the way they lived. There are three things that need to be considered when designing

gardens, and the most important is how the owners of the garden are going to use it. Lots of boisterous dogs do not go well with intricate planting; likewise a big green and tidy sward is frustrating for people who want to grow lovely things and not spend all their lives mowing. We wanted something in between those two extremes: a good slab of grass for summer parties and running children, but enough planting to soften the house (which was quite stern in places). Other parts of the garden have followed in recent years, but the beds in these photographs show the first things they see every time they come home, so they needed to sparkle no matter what season.

The first thing was to get out the chainsaw and start cutting things down. People get very nervous about cutting down trees, but sometimes it is the sensible thing to do – particularly if the tree in question is growing unevenly or at a strange angle. We even felled one enormous and venerable beech, partly because it was diseased but also because it blocked the view of a much better specimen that sat majestically in the lawn and provided a perfect link to the distant farmland. After a fair bit of



**Clockwise from top** Tulip 'Ballerina' is the perfect partner for the bronze new foliage of roses; magenta tulip 'Doll's Minuet' against a spray of anemone; 'Spring Green', white-edged 'Arabian Mystery' and 'Burgundy' tulips; double 'Blue Diamond' tulips with peach 'Menton' and aubrieta.







*Euphorbia amygdaloides* var. *robbiae* is a great foil for tulips, as is apple-green *Helleborus foetidus*.



*A tulip bulb* is a lovesome thing – a perfect little nut-brown ball of *energy*

destruction it was finally time to put things back. We decided to add in a lot of topiary balls (in yew, box and holly) to give a solid structure to the planting. They frame the front door and then bounce their way happily through all the main borders surrounded by a confection of grasses, roses (mostly the hybrid musk *Rosa* ‘Penelope’) and herbaceous plants. The idea is that the topiary looks as if it is being swept along on a breaking wave of colour.

Once we had completed the structural planting, the conversation turned to bulbs: the icing on the cake. Yes, we planted loads of daffodils, bluebells and snowdrops – a continuing task in the woodland garden – but we needed zing for the borders. Enter the tulips. Lots of them. The sight of sacks of bulbs that need planting can be daunting but the thought of the joy they will bring should be enough to keep you going through a few November afternoons.

A tulip bulb is a lovesome thing – a perfect little nut-brown ball of energy that has to be the best early bulb for mass planting in borders – much better than

**Above** Dark purple-black tulip ‘Chat Noir’ with orange ‘Ballerina’ and newly emerged red-tinged rose leaves.

## East Langton Grange TULIPS



**‘ABU HASSAN’**

Velvety maroon petals with a feathered golden-yellow edge help to lend these tulips an air of the exotic.



**‘BALLERINA’**

This elegant lily-flowered tulip in vibrant tangerine, is gorgeous paired with limey spring greens and purples.



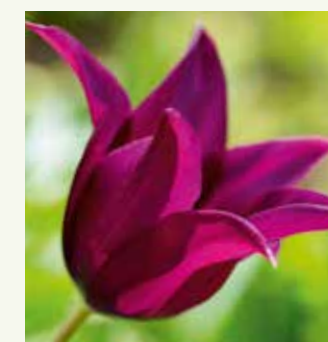
**‘HOLLAND CHIC’**

Palest pink flowers are enlivened by a flare of magenta on the outside that darkens as the flowers age.



**‘ARABIAN MYSTERY’**

A crisp edge of white on this variety’s plum-red petals adds excitement to any planting scheme.



**‘BURGUNDY’**

Another lily-flowered tulip in a rich, jewel-like shade of purple, it also reliably comes back after the first year.



**‘SPRING GREEN’**

A stalwart variety for spring, with a flash of fresh, vibrant green on the outside of creamy flowers.





**Above** Lawns sweep away from the house towards mature trees, including this stately copper beech.

**Below** Tulip 'China Pink' appears delicate but is surprisingly robust.

**Left** Purple aubrieta, seeded into cracks in the steps near the house.



daffodils. They will be followed by alliums and lilies to keep us going well into the summer. In the first year here, Sally and I sat down together and made a list. But since then the tulips are her department. She has gone from strength to strength and every year more and more bulbs arrive. Borders and pots groan with colour and I take a notebook when I visit as she always comes up with an interesting combination that I can 'borrow'.

The ground is quite heavy here which means tulips do not do more than a couple of years before they begin to lose their pizzazz. As a result they need to be beefed up every year: where you initially plant 100, then the next year you need to plant 50 more and the next year and the next year, *ad infinitum*. It sounds relentless, but my goodness it is worth it. Sally has chosen a good range of shapes from the elegantly curved lily-flowered varieties (such as tulip 'Ballerina' or 'White Triumphator') to a lovely bit where slightly deranged parrot-flowered varieties tumble into low box hedges.

This is a garden that gives great pleasure to owners, visitors and, indeed, the designer. It is a lovely and well cared for place at all times of the year but, in tulip season, it pushes up a gear and becomes very special indeed. Hooray for spring, hooray for colour and hip-hip-hooray for the tulip. ■