Let 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...
There was a magnificent avenue of limes, a whopping wisteria, some great steps and plenty of potential. Good bones, in other words
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 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.

‘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.

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

‘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.