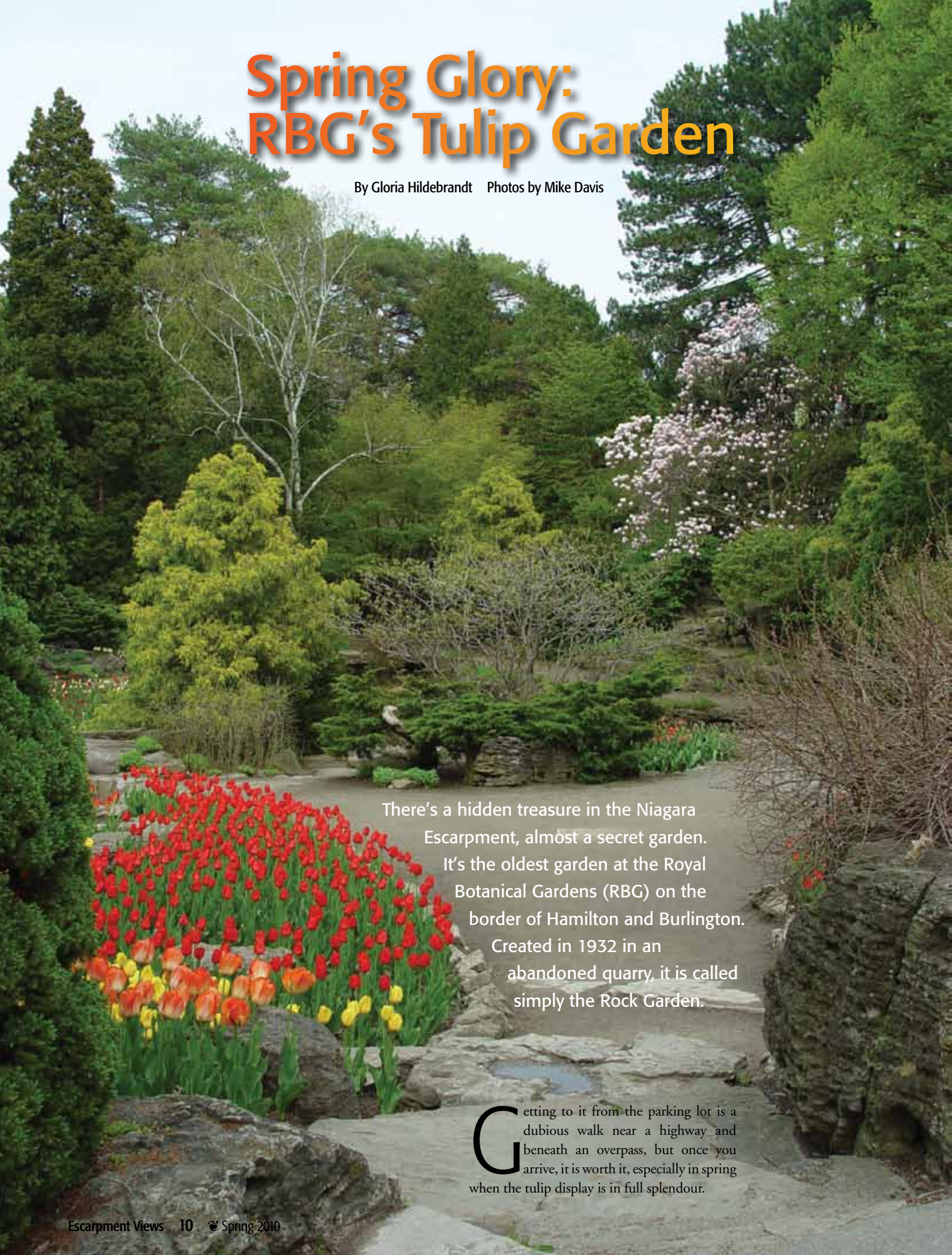


Spring Glory: RBG's Tulip Garden

By Gloria Hildebrandt Photos by Mike Davis



There's a hidden treasure in the Niagara Escarpment, almost a secret garden. It's the oldest garden at the Royal Botanical Gardens (RBG) on the border of Hamilton and Burlington. Created in 1932 in an abandoned quarry, it is called simply the Rock Garden.

Getting to it from the parking lot is a dubious walk near a highway and beneath an overpass, but once you arrive, it is worth it, especially in spring when the tulip display is in full splendour.

What RBG staff regard as the Rock Garden is three large areas: the west side, which is 3.5 hectares, the parking lot side, at three hectares, and the bowl, or former gravel pit, at 1.2 hectares. The bowl, with its terraces formed with rocks that were introduced long ago, is enchanting. Paths lead everywhere through it from top to bottom and to the top again, luring you ever on with gorgeous scenes and vignettes. Its beauty and neatness at first amaze, then prompt the realization that this is a lot of work.

Between 80,000 and 100,000 bulbs are planted each fall, then lifted out after flowering

and sold to the public each June. This year's sale will be held on June 19 from 9:30 to noon. Four staff members work full time in the Rock Garden and are joined by eight others for the fall planting. Peter Wickett is the Rock Garden's head gardener.

"He is meticulous about the work," says Belinda Gallagher, head of horticulture.

All the beds are first dug over before planting is done after Thanksgiving Day.

"The soil is pretty fertile there," adds Alex Henderson, a horticulturist and curator of collections with RBG. "Not much amending is done." Bulbs are planted according to formal

park tradition, spaced five to six inches apart in neat rows.

"Park plantings look amazing," says Gallagher. Last year, landscaping students from Fanshawe College helped with the planting, and Wickett instructed them on everything from how to use a trowel to how to protect their backs from strain.

In the spring, the chores include cleanup from winter and weeding, sometimes removing stray tulips. "You get funny things like the odd display with the wrong colour in it," explains Gallagher.

All the tulip beds are labelled for the public's reference. After the bulbs are lifted, the beds are dug again in preparation for the planting of annuals which glorify the garden for the rest of the year.

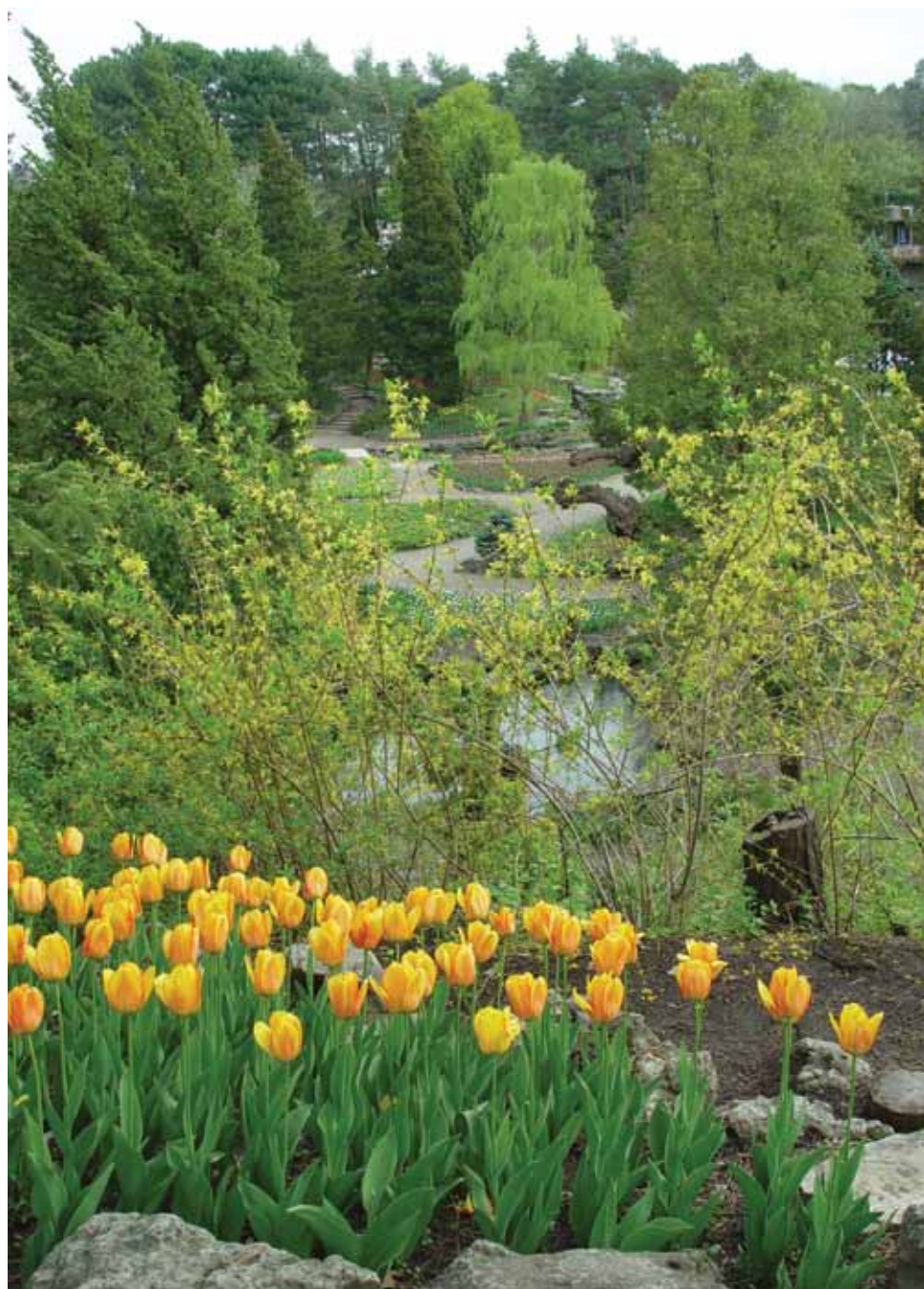
\$20,000 of Beauty

The tulip display is not cheap. The annual budget for bulbs alone is close to \$20,000. The bulbs are renewed each year for two reasons, to get the size of bloom that is advertised for each tulip, and for esthetic reasons.

"With the Botanical Gardens' emphasis on beauty and perfection, we can't have the green leaves dying back in the garden," says Gallagher.

It is the job of Jodi Vanderheyden to order the bulbs according to the gardeners' plans.

"They consider what worked last year," she explains, "and I compile one gigantic order. I make substitutions to replace what's not available any more. I get new catalogues for them to see what they might like. But we're leery of



Yellow tulips beneath blooming forsythia double the sunshine of a spring garden.

How to Care For Tulips

1. Make sure bulbs are firm.
2. Follow planting instructions.
3. Dig a hole the right depth: at least 2.5 times the diameter of the bulb.
4. Plant bulbs the right way (pointed tip) up.
5. Plant up to one foot deep to protect bulbs from squirrels.
6. Plant bulbs even if they've lost their "tunic" or brown paper covering.
7. Plant with proper spacing: planting too closely makes tulips weak, while planting too far apart gives a poor display.
8. To deter squirrels, try covering beds with chicken manure.
9. Don't plant in wet, soggy sites. Keep bulbs high and dry with good drainage.
10. After flowering, let the leaves feed the bulb.



Paths wind lazily throughout the enchanting Rock Garden.



planting new varieties in big spaces in case they don't work."

"The breeding mania for tulips continues," observes Henderson.

"We also like the tried and true," Gallagher points out.

Henderson describes the two main ways to plant tulips: in beds or in lawns. "Both have their place," he says. "If you plant them in a lawn, they have to look naturalized and you have to leave off mowing until the leaves have died off."

Gallagher suggests the way to get a naturalized look. "Toss the bulbs in the air and plant them where they fall. Don't plant in rows and plant more than you think you should."

It may come as a surprise that beyond the work of digging over the beds, planting, labeling, some weeding, then lifting the bulbs, nothing much has to be done with the tulip beds. RBG doesn't fuss with special fertilizers, bone meal, blood meal or other additives or deterrents to discourage squirrels and other garden pests.

"Tulips have evolved to grow in tough conditions," points out Henderson. "I believe that you should treat them mean and keep them keen. They don't need much."

"The volume of tulips we have keeps squirrels satisfied," says Gallagher. "But squirrels are clever, so after planting the bulbs, it's good to make the ground look undisturbed."

Deer can also be a problem in rural gardens or beds that are close to natural spaces. At RBG

How to Get Great Effects With Tulips

1. Consider flowering times. It's possible to get six weeks of flowers.
2. Choose a hot colour scheme, a subtle colour scheme, or introduce hot spots within subtle colours.
3. Plant single colours in specific shapes, such as contrasting colours in a yin/yang pattern.
4. For a formal look, plant rows of single colours and species in large numbers.
5. For a naturalized style, toss bulbs in the air and plant them where they fall.
6. Interplant tulips with other plants that echo their colour. Remember that vertical planting is just as important as horizontal planting.
7. Always plant more bulbs than you think are enough.

The steps up the Rock Garden inspire photographers and fine artists alike.



From 80,000 to 100,000 tulip bulbs are planted and lifted each year.



Hot colours dazzle on cool spring days.

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a few years ago, all the tulips were eaten by deer. Now there are 12-foot fences surrounding the Rock Garden.

Not everyone has the resources to create tulip displays like those at the RBG, yet they work well in small scale.

“People should plant bulbs,” urges Gallagher. “People get tired by the fall, but gardens are so enhanced by spring bulbs. We see the first ones and think ‘Thank God we made it through winter!’” ■



Belinda Gallagher's Top 10 Tulips

1. Tulipa 'Gavota' - a triumph tulip which is a rich shade of burgundy with cream and yellow and fares well in a container planting
2. Tulipa 'Deidre' - a viridiflora with a sculptural shape
3. Tulipa turkestanica - a lovely little pale yellow species tulip with terrific seed heads
4. Tulipa 'Little Beauty' - small and early flowering is bright magenta with a navy blue centre and fragrant
5. Tulipa kaufmanniana 'Waterlily' - big, big flowers on short plant, creamy white with red streak
6. Tulipa 'Queen of the Night' - a Darwin that is almost black and a good returner
7. Tulipa 'Antoinette' - bouquet or multi-flowering and the colour changes in 3 stages
8. Tulipa 'Monte Carlo' - fragrant, double early tulip that is Big-Bird yellow
9. Tulipa clusiana - my favourite species, looks delicate but is tough as nails. The cultivar T. 'Cynthia' is the most readily available.
10. Tulipa 'Negrita' - a triumph tulip that is dark purple and also a good returner



The top part of the RBG Rock Garden invites you to stop and admire the view.



Grape hyacinths frame a few mauve tulips beautifully.



Underplanting a magnolia tree with pink tulips creates a stunning wall of colour.