

GROWERTALKS

GT in Brief

6/1/2023

Just in Time for Tulips

Jennifer Zurko

In early May, days before the annual Tulip Time festival was being held in Holland, Michigan, I climbed the stairs of the large windmill at Windmill Island Gardens to look out over four of their tulip fields on a blustery, spitty, 45-degree day. Despite my frozen fingers and toes, the 170,000 tulips planted around the property sure looked like spring had arrived.

My tour was given by Sara Simmons, a horticulturist at Windmill Island Gardens and the great-great-great granddaughter of Holland's founder Albertus C. Van Raalte, who founded the town in 1847. In 1927, a local biology teacher encouraged the town to plant tulips bulbs, and two years later, the first Tulip Time event was held.

Currently, Windmill Island Gardens and the town of Holland sees 74,000 visitors during the nine days of Tulip Time. There's the "sausage man" who comes with his food truck to sell polish sausage and hot dogs, a carousel, a gift shop and a miniature display they call "Little Netherlands" to entertain attendees. The largest focal point is the 250-year-old working windmill that was placed in the gardens in 1964. (I was standing on the wrap-around balcony of this windmill when I took the main photo.)

But what most people come to see during Tulip Time is, obviously, the tulips. Sara said that there are over 170,000 bulbs planted around the property protected by 8-ft. wire fences to keep them from being devoured by gluttonous deer.

"Tulips are like cream puffs to deer," said Sara.

Sara's counterpart at Windmill Island Gardens, Betsy Buurma Morton, plans the gardens and orders all of the bulbs every year, sourcing them from different suppliers in the Netherlands. The gardens share the order with the town of Holland, which plants tulip bulbs all around the downtown area, as well. Once the tulips peter out, annuals grown from plugs in 100-year-old greenhouses in the conservatory are placed in the 40 different display beds.

Every year, the plantings at Windmill Island Gardens are based on a theme and this year it's "Celestial Summer" inspired by the sun, moon and stars. There's also a community garden with 48 plots, a sunflower field and a native pollinator garden. All total, there are 36 acres that provide a lovely way to spend a few hours, from tulip time to the fall. **GT**

