

WEEKLY

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OUTDOORS

Fields of Dreams

AN INSIDER'S GUIDE TO THE TULIP FESTIVAL

Story and photo by John D'Onofrio · Wednesday, April 13, 2011



It's spring! The days are getting longer, the green is getting greener—and the Skagit Valley is unveiling its shimmering fields of tulips.

Of course, the tulips of the Skagit Valley have become justifiably famous around the country. But for the devoted seeker of botanical color, that fame has brought an undesirable element to the fields in the last few decades: crowds.

Time was you could stroll, witless with ecstasy, through the fields—go ahead, tiptoe if you must—and enjoy glorious golden moments of reverie amongst the seas of color, alone with your thoughts (and perhaps your camera). Nowadays it's a little more, um, hectic down in the bucolic valley of the Skagit. Traffic jams are common. Men in fluorescent vests will tell you where to park. Step right up.

But guess what: you can still experience the fields without the whooping and hoopla. Ditch work early on a weekday when the weather's decent (after all, this is the northwest, so let's be realistic). Head down I-5 on a Wednesday afternoon and you might just have the fields to yourself.

Turn down Beaver Marsh Road and let your imagination guide you. Check the online tulip maps (<http://www.tulipfestival.org>) before you go to see where the color action is most intense on any given day. Open your eyes. Watch the sunlight play in the fields, a meeting of equals. Walk away from the road, way out into the middle of the fields. Close your eyes and open them again, to be astonished anew.

In all these great United States, there are few spectacles of horticultural luminescence to rival these radiant fields. I've lived in Bellingham for more than 20 years and I've only missed the tulips a few times.

You should definitely check out the display gardens of Roozengaarde for a more cultivated experience. Definitely go on a weekday afternoon, as this place is ground zero for the tulip crowd and will be reliably mobbed on the weekends. They charge admission and it's a bargain at twice the price.

The owners of Roozengaarde have made tulips a way of life since the Skagit Valley was young. They came over from the Netherlands and planted their first tulips here in 1956. Heck, they invented the Tulip Festival.

Today, they're the biggest bulb grower in North America with more than 1,000 acres of flowers; besides tulips, they also grow daffodils and irises.

The gardens are transcendent. Maybe it's the long grey northwest winter, but the colors will dazzle your retinas and kick-start your soul. Here in cloud country, spring is good news indeed.

But don't let a cloudy day stop you. In fact, cloud cover can make the colors even more vibrant. And there's something about the Skagit Valley; the end of the day here will sometimes part its skirts and send holy colonnades of light down through the grey miasma to bathe the fields in lurid Technicolor. When this happens the sunset can be a religious experience worthy of William James.