

https://www.capitalpress.com/nation_world/agriculture/turkey-s-largest-city-carpeted-with-colorful-tulips/article_7ad8cfee-6b65-11e9-a7cd-17120b9fb60c.html

Turkey's largest city carpeted with colorful tulips

By PARIS ACHEN For the Capital Press May 3, 2019



The Asya Lale tulip carpet in Istanbul, Turkey.

Paris Achen/For the Capital Press

ISTANBUL — On a sunny Saturday afternoon, pairs of brides and grooms weighed down in finery trek up the tiered terrain of Emirgan Park to have their photos snapped against the resplendent backdrop of the city's annual tulip festival.

Flocks of local and international tourists wind through beds of brightly colored tulips planted in whimsical textile patterns. Officers vainly try to keep the tulip admirers from posing for photos and trampling on the meticulously manicured beds and lawns.

Just when it seems the kaleidoscopic display is over, another staircase or curved pathway leads to another brilliant spectacle.

On one slope, for instance, a bed of tulips forms the shape of a map of Turkey and the red-and-white pattern of the Turkish flag.

Sidney Ayers, a native of Portland, Ore., who now lives in Izmir, Turkey, visited Istanbul in early April to see the tulip festival in Emirgan Park.

Several years ago, Ayers experienced another tulip festival at the Wooden Shoe Tulip Farm in Woodburn, Ore. The annual festival has a more agrarian feel: Visitors stroll through expansive fields in the countryside to admire the blooms, said Ayers, a teacher at an international school in Izmir.

“There is something about being in a giant field with tulips, seeing so many at one time,” she said. “It really washes over you.

“The way it is laid out in Emirgan is special in a different way — walking around, a new twist or secret space is revealed at every turn, and it just goes on and on.”

Tulip fanfare has been part of the culture in Istanbul and Turkey for hundreds of years. The flower was emblematic of the Ottoman Empire, headquartered in Turkey from 1300 to 1920. Istanbul is still known as the “City of Tulips.”

The flower was first cultivated in the Ottoman Empire — not in the Netherlands — a fact acknowledged even by one of Holland’s main tourism websites, Holland.com. The bloom's name originated from the Turkish word for "turban," “so called from the fancied resemblance of the flower to a turban,” according to the Online Etymology Dictionary.

In the 15th or 16th century, Turks brought tulips to Holland, where the flower gained worldwide popularity.

Istanbul’s month-long tulip festival isn’t restricted to Emirgan Park. It encompasses several major city parks, street-side flower beds and the historical Sultanahmet Square, home to iconic landmarks Hagia Sophia and the Blue Mosque.

The Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality on April 25 rolled out for the fifth consecutive year the world’s largest “carpet” of live tulips in Sultanahmet Square.

Measuring about 4,600 square feet, the carpet is made of about 640,000 tulips and designed in the pattern of a Turkish rug, said Korkut Yetgin, spokesman for Asya Lale, a large producer of tulips based in Konya, Turkey. The company provided all of the tulips used in the carpet this year.

Asya Lale employees helped municipal employees weave the carpet flower-by-flower. It took 2 1/2 days to complete and cost a total of about 1.2 million Turkish liras, Yetgin said.

Despite Turkey’s historical claim to the tulip, its bulbs are primarily a domestic commodity. The country imports more tulips than it exports, according to the Turkish Statistical Institute.

In 2018, Turkey exported 22,359 pounds of dormant tulip bulbs valued at \$28,500 and imported 1.4 million pounds worth about \$3.6 million.

Turkish farmers produced about 40.7 million cut tulip flowers in 2018, the value of which was not made available by the Turkish Statistical Institute.

About 101 acres were planted to tulips the same year. That's about 1% of the land used to produce cut flowers, according to the statistical institute. But tulips still rank fifth in the country for production of cut flowers, after chrysanthemums (47.6 million), roses (97.6 million), Gerber daisies (133.4 million) and carnations (607.1 million).

Many of the tulip varieties grown in Turkey were developed in the Netherlands, said Yetgin, the spokesman for Asya Lale.

All of Asya Lale's 80 varieties grown in Konya were originally bred in the Netherlands, Yetgin said.

Asya Lale ("lale" means tulip in Turkish) sells about 35 million bulbs per year inside Turkey, including to several supermarket chains. The company exports about 3 million bulbs to neighboring countries, including Bulgaria, Romania, Tunisia, Iran, Qatar, Pakistan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Their goal is to eventually sell the blooms to Walmart, Yetgin said.